PALESTINIAN YOUTH PERSPECTIVES ON EXILE POLITICS:
BETWEEN SOLIDARITY AND LEADERSHIP

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By

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ABSTRACT

As the Palestinian community in the Occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip has transitioned from having a political leadership in exile to the localized governing of the Palestinian Authority over the past twenty years, the relationship and conceptions of the role of the exile have subsequently been altered. This paper explores the perspectives of a generation who has been raised under this local Authority and draws on interviews with Palestinian youth in Ramallah, Nablus, Bethlehem, and Gaza in order to develop an account of conceptions of the exile community (particularly in the United States) and its role, if any, in the larger Palestinian national liberation movement. These interviews bring to the surface themes of bond and communication with the diaspora, community rehabilitation, political resuscitation, and a renegotiation between local Palestinian youth and their diasporic counterparts of how the other will fit into future activist organizing. These themes are complicated by issues of an absence of political leadership and clear vision, the legacy of the Oslo Accords, social attitudes towards youth activism, and attempts to develop a nascent youth movement despite largely held feelings of weak ties with the diaspora. Palestinian youth are eagerly reaching out to each other, across imposed borders and categories, building networks, asking questions, and working to lay a foundation for future political struggle towards liberation and self-determination.
Preface

Many things brought me to initially choosing the topic of exile politics and activism for Palestine for my thesis, as well as undoubtedly color the research I conducted, none of which are immune to how I understand my own positionality within that context or the particular and significant experience of conducting the research while living in Palestine for the first time.

Though my family did not permanently immigrate to the United States until I was five (the move itself a result of forced deportation for being Palestinian), as a result of my father’s college years in America, I grew up with stories of Palestinian student activism in the United States during the 1960s. As I grew older and witnessed the current state of activism, student organizing, and connection, or at times lack thereof, between the exile community in the U.S. and Palestinians living under Occupation, I sensed a sort of rupture in the story of my father’s exile activism and the one my generation had come to know and is currently undergoing. After independent and guided academic investigation into the history, politics, and social underpinnings of this perceived rupture, I became convinced that there exists a changing dialectic within the local Palestinian youth activist community today in relation to its diasporic counterpart. What that dialectic is and what it is shifting from, if anything, on the other hand, is something I was much less clear about.

Throughout the process of developing the initial research design and conducting focus groups and interviews for this study, my conclusions became informed as much by my official interviews as the informal conversations and organized activities with activist youth in which I participated. It became obvious to me very quickly that I was engaging in an examination not only of historical shifts in political organization, but the emotional interaction of two realms of a
community and a generation within it that is still discovering and re-discovering itself in relation to those realms. There was a continuum of that interaction expressed to me in a range of self-evaluations – from the assertion by a U.S.-based Palestinian activist of her “feeling of helplessness” and activism as a means to connect to Palestine to the almost shock of a Palestinian from the West Bank first encountering “informed and active” Palestinians raised in the United States, admitting “I didn’t know Palestinians like this existed in America.”

My greatest challenge was maneuvering through this continuum, teasing out its contradictions where they appeared, digging deeper than the instinctual responses to moments of reflection from the participants, and most importantly, making the historical connections in and by which many of the conversations were based and informed – irrespective of explicit acknowledgement of such by the youth. The experience and opportunity of conducting interviews in person in the West Bank, something I was unable to do for Gaza due to the current Israeli siege, also placed this research within a unique personal moment as a Palestinian visiting the Occupied Territory for the first time. My experience in Palestine prior to that moment had been limited to the Gaza Strip and a childhood day trip to Jerusalem almost a decade earlier. My positionality as a Palestinian-American researching perception on the Palestinian-American exile community demanded as high of a level of honesty to those whom I interviewed as it did from myself.

In much the same way that this study is an investigation of dialectic in flux and all that entails working on a still developing national movement and relationship, so my presence as a researcher and its interaction with the groups and individuals interviewed varied and became in some instances a sort of microcosm for the very dialectic I was observing. Curiosity was by no
means a one way street and often the youth I interviewed and spoke to had as many questions for me as I did for them. Though these questions and subsequent conversation were not asked until after the interviews and focus groups and participants gave their answers, there is no doubt that their knowledge of my ability to answer such questions regarding activism in the United States had an impact on their relationship to and interaction with me.

It is difficult to say with any certainty what, if any, and how responses were tainted by my positionality, though I am fairly confident given the atmosphere of the interviews and focus groups and the types of questions asked by the participants post-interview that they were at the very least not self-censoring for the benefit of my comfort. Being in the same age group of many of the participants was a significant factor in lessening the impact of potential power structures of influence as a researcher. However, this effect of my age would not have been as significant of a factor without my status as a politically active Palestinian.

There are lines we draw in the sand as researchers, but there are also aspects of our own identity and privilege with which we have to come to terms. As a Palestinian youth living in exile, there is only so much I can claim about my distance from this topic or from the population of youth whom I interviewed. In the end, it is my connection to these individuals that gave me the opportunity to conduct this research and I do not take lightly the ease at which they gave me their trust or the responsibility that comes with sharing the conversations these youth are having about and with a diasporic community of which I am a part.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Rochelle Davis and Noura Erakat for their advice and support throughout my research and writing. Their mentorship is an invaluable source of strength.

My deepest gratitude to the youth who participated in this study, and who are actively engaged in a struggle for dignity and justice, all the while working to understand their own collective. It is a privilege to have been embraced and trusted by you.

To my parents – no amount of words could adequately thank or acknowledge your contribution to having made this thesis or any accomplishment in my life possible. You are towering examples of hard work, determination, principle, and love, and I learn from you every day.

Completion of this thesis, particularly in the final weeks of writing, would not have been possible without the heartfelt encouragement and, at times, tough love of many amazing friends, peers, and my siblings. Much thanks and love to you all.

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Many thanks,
Nour A. Joudah
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Introduction

Due to the exile nature of the Palestinian “liberation” movement from the founding of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1964 until the signing of the Oslo Accords and its move to the West Bank and Gaza in 1993 as a “governing” authority, the fund raising and organizing of the struggle for the liberation of Palestine was led in many ways from outside the Occupied Territories for decades. The generation born during the First Intifada and shortly thereafter and raised in the heyday of post-Oslo was surrounded by the official language of the progress of peace-making and self-rule while still witnessing and experiencing life under a continued Israeli military occupation. The PLO’s official discourse surrounding the peace process, and later the Palestinian Authority (PA), still invoked connection to the greater refugee and exile community outside the West Bank and Gaza. However, the PA’s allowed purview and main focus was increasingly on local issues within the territories, as opposed to exiled sectors of the Palestinian national body. Given these developments, how does this generation understand their exilic counterparts as members of a shared community and struggle? In what ways are youth activists raised under this local Authority interacting with Palestinian youth activists outside Palestine? And, how do their understandings impact their activism and vice versa?

There has been a considerable amount of research on the PLO and Palestinian resistance groups in general in a historical and political context; the role of exiles in political decision making; the identity politics of exile and formation of nations as imagined communities; documentation of personal stories of refugees and living outside of the homeland; as well as, the
political shift from pre- to post-Oslo and the subsequent creation of the Palestinian Authority.1 However, there has been little to no research on Palestinian youth raised during the Oslo period, a generation now college-aged, and their imagination of what constitutes Palestinian society and the national body, as well as the role, if any, for that body in their new and developing forms of activism in the current context.

Juliane Hammer takes these issues on to some degree in her book *Palestinians Born in Exile: Diaspora and the Search for a Homeland*. Hammer’s study focuses on migration to Palestine as a result of the peace process in the 1990’s, in which over one hundred thousand Palestinians “return” to the West Bank and Gaza from exile in conjunction with the entry of the PLO to the Occupied Territories. While she does not deal with issues of activism, Hammer does concentrate on youth and their changing notions of identity. She focuses specifically on the experiences of those young Palestinians who were born in exile and returned during their adolescence or teenage years to Palestine in the mid 1990’s. Hammer is struck by the reality that while most Palestinians live outside of historic Palestine and in such diverse circumstances, Palestine is still the most important reference point for their lives.2 Perhaps most relevant for the purposes of this study are the initial observations which lead Hammer to explore the experiences

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of these ‘returnees’ – “one being the diversity of stories and experiences of Palestinians and the other an overwhelming sense of belonging to one another as a people.” ³ These characteristics of the Palestinian context, as well as the flexible and changing nature of young people’s ideas, are overwhelmingly present in this thesis, as well. Both the understandings Hammer or I present are not rigid conceptualizations by the youth, but dynamic and in flux.

While academic research regarding today’s Palestinian youth is lacking, there is no lack of speculation in the media on what this generation will do next. Steven Erlanger, reporter for The New York Times, wrote in March 2007 that the Palestinian territories are “an overwhelmingly youthful place – fifty six percent of Palestinians are under nineteen, and in Gaza, seventy five percent of the population is under thirty, according to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics.” Nader Said, ⁴ political scientist at Birzeit University in Ramallah, explained that “this generation has lost faith in political solutions. They haven’t lived one moment in a period of real hope for a real state.” ⁵ Only about twenty two percent of Palestinians under thirty believe that a peaceful situation will be negotiated between Israel and Palestinians as opposed to the fifty eight percent who expect more violent struggles over the next five to ten years. Gaza is poorer than the West Bank with seventy percent of its one and a half million population consisting of refugees and their descendents. More conservative and religious than its West Bank counterpart, media has called it “the heartland of Hamas” (even though Hamas also won in elections in the West Bank). Erlanger asserts that ultimately, due to the failure of the Oslo

³ Ibid., 3.
⁴ Dr. Nader Said is now the head of projects at the Arad World for Research and Development (AWRAD), which conducted polls and surveys cited in Chapters 1 and 2.
Accords, contemporary Palestinian youth learned a lesson from their First Intifada predecessors and heroes that “no one can resist with stones or build a nation without violence,” as a thirty year old man who was a sixteen year old participant in the First Intifada relayed. However, if one presents this argument to active youth mobilizing in the territories today, many will tell him the lesson they’ve learned from the First Intifada is just the opposite.

The kinds of popular resistance and activist organizing for mobilization that have occurred in the past four years since Erlanger’s article have been more a refutation of the violence of the Second Intifada than of the character of the First. Erlanger’s analysis is correct in that most Palestinians have lost faith in negotiations, but what has come of that is an apathetic complacency, not a collective decision to pursue armed resistance. Instead, many activists now are hearkening the First Intifada not only in its largely non-violent nature, but more importantly, in its widespread grassroots approach of disrupting the system through direct confrontation, something that has become more difficult to do since the implementation of the Oslo Accords and a new security reality with Palestinian Authority.

What my research shows is that what the youth seem to be doing now is building coalitions, hoping that when the bubble of complacency bursts, they will have a network ready. By organizing conferences, training participants in towns like Nabi Saleh and others, and focusing on initiatives like Boycott, Divestment Sanctions (BDS), the local and exile activist community is working to build a movement in a structure that does not fit into the highly rigid mode of past movements in Palestinian resistance. They are eager and they are reaching out to

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6 Ibid.
each other, talking to each other, and most importantly, doing it rather openly. I don’t mean this “openly” in the sense that there is no strategic secrecy or privacy in planning or between activists. However, events like this summer’s conference on the September statehood bid, organized by local Ramallah activists, initially posted as a private event on Facebook, quickly became public by a decision of the organizers. It was open to the public, and as an attendee mentioned to me, “we know there are mukhabarat (intelligence) here, and we don’t care. I’m fed up. I’m going to listen, but I’m going to leave here and call people too.” The talking that is happening openly is an attempt to cultivate a culture of conversation, a culture long-present among Palestinians, but one that has not been harvested in some time. Abbas’ statehood bid aside, people are talking and activists are encouraging them to do so, banking on a moment when they can take that talk and emotion and collectively mobilize their communities.8 Furthermore, many of these activists believe their Arab youth counterparts across the region are helping sell the appeal of the power of protest.

As the Arab Spring fervor spreads, this unique political moment is undoubtedly one of the most dynamic periods the region has witnessed. Palestine is by no means immune to what is happening. With increasing calls in the West Bank, Gaza, and diaspora criticizing political leadership and the path they have taken in recent years, the dynamism and uncertainty of what comes next contains the potential for individuals (particularly youth) to voice opinions, concerns, and desires for their vision of future activism and if and how Palestinians in exile should be a part of it. As the Palestinian “liberation” movement – though less frequently labeled as such – is

one which is still in progress, and recognizing the significant refugee dynamic of the Palestinian consciousness and identity, the nature and perception of exile politics’ involvement in resistance is important and relevant for the future.

Obviously, to conduct an extensive opinion poll, even with unlimited funding and time (neither of which are present), would be a near impossible task, particularly given the realities of life in the Occupied Territories. To be clear, an opinion poll is not the goal of this investigation, but instead, an ethnographic study to gain deeper insight into how a generation that has lived a majority of their lives with the PLO and PA within the territories views the involvement of the exile Palestinian national body in the modern “liberation” movement as they understand it today. This generation, now ranging in age from eighteen to thirty years old, is the first generation of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza to be raised for the majority, if not the entirety of their lives, in the presence of what for thirty years prior had been an exile leadership.

Young Palestinians inside Israel were not a part of this study, an unfortunate limitation and perhaps one that could be built on in future research. However, the reason for their absence is not only an inability to cover the sheer diversity of the Palestinian landscape, but also a desire to focus specifically on youth who have been raised under the Palestinian Authority – a prominent factor in their developing notions of community.

There was an extensive discussion in my interviews of the diaspora as a whole, but I also focused in on the Palestinian community in the United States more specifically. This choice rested on two main factors. The first is my personal proximity to the Palestinian diaspora in the US and that proximity and relationship as a main trigger to the questions I started asking myself when I was designing the study. The second factor is that though Palestinians in the US are not
the only portion of the Palestinian diaspora in a position of privilege, they are often seen as a separate category from other Palestinians living in the West, whether in Europe or Latin America, and this is something that was affirmed for me again and again throughout my interviews with youth in the West Bank and Gaza. These factors should not be misunderstood as a tacit agreement to the opinion that the United States’ role or presence should be prioritized or emphasized over other local or other international actors. In the context of this study, it is a locale of one wing of the Palestinian exile community.

Specifically, this thesis looks at what is known about and how involvement by the Palestinian-American community in the greater Palestinian cause is viewed “on the ground” in Palestine, expressly: How are the various forms of involvement by Palestinians in the United States heard about and judged by activists living under Israeli occupation? How do those Palestinians view the role of Palestinian-Americans’ involvement as contributing (if at all) to the greater Palestinian liberation struggle? Ultimately, what these larger questions bring to the surface and unravel are more significant and pressing questions and issues for the activists, including but not limited to how they are envisioning new ways to organize, a renegotiation of their relationship to each other, and how that plays in to the dialectic of political thought and goals of the movement. What became quickly apparent as I conducted my research was a much larger and more pertinent historical moment of transition in which these conversations were set, a context of which these activist youth were all too aware and made sure I was, as well.

As expected, the youth I spoke to invoked a diverse array of concerns about political leadership and perspectives on the Palestinian diaspora, but for all of their differences in approach, their responses were fundamentally based in a commonality of notions of political
resuscitation and community rehabilitation. Responses from participants regarding the role of the PA and the PLO, often unprompted by questions on my part, struck at something deeper than disagreement with specific policies. Instead, they were recognizing and reflecting on a need to reshape and revive political participation in their community, including a central point of considering the diaspora in that participation. Community rehabilitation in this sense is not meant to imply a dramatic restructuring of Palestinian society, but refers to the desire and experimentation by young Palestinian activists to treat a perceived disconnect between members of their generation living in other locales. This rehabilitation and political resuscitation which they seek, discuss, and work towards is done in hope that greater connection between dedicated youth will also have an impact on the larger Palestinian communities in which they live.

Methodology and Approach

This ethnography is a qualitative study made up of four basic methods: focus groups, individual interviews, participant observation, and secondary source analysis. Based on personal contacts through family, friends, and time spent in the West Bank, I conducted both focus groups and individual interviews from snowball sampling with youth in the Ramallah, Nablus, and Bethlehem areas. Through peers in these three cities, I reached out to active youth who might have been interested and willing to discuss their views on the role of the diaspora and exile Palestinian community. The make-up of groups was based mainly on the willingness of participants. No particular socio-economic group was targeted, nor was anyone asked to provide information on their socio-economic backgrounds. As detailed in the approved IRB protocol and consent form, focus groups were audio recorded and participants informed of that prior to participation. Focus groups and interviews were conducted in private settings, at the comfort and
request of the participants to further protect anonymity. Participants were told the purpose of the study using the same language of the consent forms (“about your perspective on participation of groups of people outside of Palestine who work for or on the cause”). These conversations were kept informal and often organized through friends who have had experience doing solidarity work with Palestinian-American exile sponsored organizations. It was made clear to all participants that their participation was voluntary and held no bearing on any tie to myself or the mutual contact who put us in touch. As stated in the consent scripts, participants in focus groups and interviews were told that they could request for the audio recording to be turned off at any time, though no one made such request at any point.

While I conducted interviews in person in the West Bank, the current Israeli border closures around the Gaza Strip prevented me from travelling there and conducting focus groups or interviews in person. However, I conducted a focus group with youth in Gaza using a video call on Skype. The participants of focus groups did not participate in individual interviews and vice versa; they comprised of completely different individuals.

I conducted four individual interviews, three focus groups, and one double interview with Palestinian youth living in Palestine, as well as two preliminary interviews with Palestinians in the United States prior to my departure (25 total participants). The interviews were respectively coded as R1, R2, R3, BTBS-1; the focus groups as N-FG, BTBS-FG, G-FG, the double interview BTDH-G, and the preliminary interviews in the United States as DC/R and SF/NY. The letters of the interview titles correspond with locations: R for Ramallah, BTBS for Bethlehem/Beit Sahour, N for Nablus, G for Gaza, BTDH for Bethlehem/Dheisheh Camp, DC/R
for Washington, D.C and Ramallah, and SF/NY for San Francisco Bay Area, CA and New York, NY.

All interviews were anonymous. The names present in the study are fictional and serve the purpose only of personalizing the story of these young people who gave their time to participate. Below is a breakdown of the gender, age, and cities which the participant is originally from and in which he or she was raised, respectively. The breakdown below does not include activist acquaintances such as Ahmed, Sami, and Nabil, quoted at the beginning of Chapter 1, who were not part of the formal interview process, but who contributed in an informal capacity to contextualizing the responses of other participants by providing me access to the greater community and growing activist network in the West Bank.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Hometown(s)</th>
<th>Raised in</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>R1</td>
<td>Dina</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Hebron, Jerusalem</td>
<td>Bethlehem, Ramallah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R2</td>
<td>Hassan</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Kufr Thilith (near Qalqilya)</td>
<td>Syria and Jordan (until age 10), Kufr Thilith (age 10 – present; recently moved to Ramallah)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R3</td>
<td>Awda</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Deir Tareef, Ramla</td>
<td>Ramallah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BTBS-1</td>
<td>Nadeem</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Beit Sahour</td>
<td>Beit Sahour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DC/R</td>
<td>Reem</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Yaffa</td>
<td>Jordan, Ramallah (attended graduate school in Washington, DC)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SF/NY</td>
<td>Selwa</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Bir Zeit</td>
<td>San Francisco Bay Area, living in New York City at time of interview</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Many Palestinians, both within the Occupied Territories and in the diaspora, continue to identify strongly with their family’s pre-1948 town as their hometown, as opposed to the town in which they were actually raised. This information also provides insight to their refugee background, or lack thereof.
<table>
<thead>
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<th>Code</th>
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<th>Gender</th>
<th>Hometown(s)</th>
<th>Raised in</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>N-FG</td>
<td>22</td>
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<td>Jenin, Nablus</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Qada\textsuperscript{10} Nablus, Jenin</td>
<td>Nablus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Kober, Deir Ghassaneh</td>
<td>Kober</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Nablus</td>
<td>Nablus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Qada Nablus, Hebron</td>
<td>Tulkaram</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Haifa, Sebastia</td>
<td>Nablus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G-FG</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Gaza</td>
<td>Egypt, Gaza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Gaza</td>
<td>Gaza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>Female</td>
<td>Gaza</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>Male</td>
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<td>Gaza</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Gaza</td>
<td>Gaza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BTBS-FG</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Beit Sahour</td>
<td>Beit Sahour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Yaffa</td>
<td>Beit Sahour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Beit Sahour</td>
<td>Beit Sahour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Beit Sahour</td>
<td>Beit Sahour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BTDH-G (Yousef &amp; Aboud)</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Zakaria</td>
<td>Dheisheh Camp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Ajour</td>
<td>Dheisheh Camp</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The focus groups and interviews gave me an opportunity to gauge and determine the path of the project as a whole, as well as a significant wealth of data by capitalizing on the group dynamic that inevitably developed as these issues were discussed, at times bringing to surface thoughts, concerns, or reactions to others that individuals would not have thought to mention in one on one interviews. The purpose of utilizing the focus group method is the difference in kind of data produced in comparison with individual interviews and other general observations. It has

\textsuperscript{10}Qada refers to the close vicinity of a village to a main city. Often times, Palestinians from small towns who do not expect someone to know their village or do not want to explain exactly where it is located will say ‘Qada’ and the closest main town or city – similar to residents of towns around San Francisco, identifying as Bay Area residents.
been argued that focus groups present a more natural environment because “participants are influencing and influenced by others – just as they are in life.”\textsuperscript{11} While the discussion and topic was focused, there was no pressure by me as the moderator for the group to reach any sort of consensus, but instead to navigate the comments, thought processes, feelings, and intricacies of the conversation as participants discussed the issues proposed.\textsuperscript{12} Participatory research was employed in recruiting participants for these groups by involving members of the activist community in conducting the research, also offering useful information in study of their choices. One crucial aspect of developing these focus groups was avoiding mixing people who might feel as if they have different levels of expertise or power; a relaxed and trusting environment was integral for the participants to feel at ease during the conversations. The typical end goal of focus groups of achieving saturation, a point of hearing the full range of ideas and not getting new information, was not a feasible goal in the context of this study. Given that, the benefit of the information and reactions expressed during the groups also serve as a contrast to responses from individual interviews.

Anthropologists have long used a combination of interviews and observation while conducting fieldwork. Observing often times is not formal, but instead the assumption of a role that will allow for extensive access to members of the community being studied, usually leading to instances of informal interviews or informative conversations. Even the most open-ended and free-flowing of interviews are constrained on some level by questions, setting, pre-conceived notions on what the researcher expects, or desire by the participant to convey a specific aspect

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 12.
they find relevant to the researcher’s topic. As a Palestinian youth, myself fluent in colloquial Palestinian Arabic, politically well-versed, and with contacts and friends in the activist community, I began the study already with a certain level of access unattainable to others. However, it is important to note that my participant observation in this sense did not involve sitting in on formal meetings as much as being present for brainstorming sessions and debates that arose among the activists and youth. The other portion of my participant observation was involvement in the planning and moderating of a workshop in October 2011 at the Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) National Conference at Columbia University in New York. The workshop was an opportunity to include some of the questions that arose during conversations with activists in Palestine on solidarity organizing in the United States and witness the subsequent conversations that developed. This latter portion will be discussed more extensively in Chapter 3.

These interviews, focus groups, and participant observation are supplemented by secondary sources from authors who have done research on the experience of exile in the Palestinian and non-Palestinian contexts, both on personal emotional levels, as well as in regards to political organization. In addition to these sources, I present historical background on the transition of Palestinian leadership in exile to their local presence in the territories, as well as a brief sketch of the current context in which these youth activists live. All of these sources and sections are tied together with the theme of tarabot, bond, and tawasol, communication, between the exile community and those living in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and a young generation renegotiating their conceptions of the relationship between them in the realm of activist organizing. Before delving into the historical background, however, it is necessary first
to clarify the terms of exile and diaspora in relation to how they are used for the purposes of this thesis.

**Theory and Terminology**

In Arabic, as in English, there are concepts which though have specificities and their own vocabulary, are used interchangeably or, at the very least, relatively loosely in society. Two such terms for both languages and particularly pertinent for our purposes here are ‘exile,’ *manfa*, and ‘diaspora,’ *shatat*. The decision to use the term ‘exile politics’ and not ‘diaspora politics’ in the title of this study is intentional. Despite the use of *shatat* as a term commonly used to describe the greater Palestinian community and its circumstance during conversations in Arabic with most Palestinians, there are historical and theoretical foundations which make ‘exile’ a more appropriate choice, particularly in an examination of political organization outside the homeland.

There has been a dramatic and explosive amount of published literature in the emerging fields of refugee studies, diaspora studies, and study of displacement in the past twenty years, and a re-conceptualization of the use of terms involved during the past forty years. By looking at a sample from this literature which discusses the development of the field and evolving understanding of the terms, appropriate application for the context at hand becomes easier to determine.

In “Refugees and Exile: From ‘Refugee Studies’ to the Natural Order of Things,” Lisa H. Malkki traces the discursive domains “within which ‘the refugee’ and/or ‘being in exile’ have been constituted.”13 She argues that it is important in this particular historic moment in the field of anthropology to think critically about how the study of displacement is framed. While she

recognizes that forced population movements have a number of unique sociopolitical, economic, and historic causes which would leave one to conclude the term “refugee” is useful only as far as a legal or descriptive circumstance and not a “kind” or “type” of person, she also posits that many studies on refugees neglect these dimensions.\footnote{Ibid., 496.} Regardless, understanding that this is a field in flux, she also warns against a rigid structuring or specialization of the domain so as to not alter potential research trajectories that have not yet been explored. Malkki asserts that there is no “‘proto-refugee’ of which the modern refugee is a direct descendant;” however, the social and legal standardizing of its modern form was a consequence of the post-WWII reality.\footnote{Ibid., 498.} A large portion of the article discusses refugees in the humanitarian, development, and military realms, but what is most relevant is the differentiation she makes between refugees, stateless persons, and displaced persons – terms often used synonymously.

Malkki cites Grahl-Madsen’s summary of legal definitions and explains that a stateless person is “any individual who is not considered by any state to possess its nationality. That is, ‘a person may possess nationality or be stateless at the time when he becomes a refugee, and a refugee of the former category may retain or lose his nationality without his quality of refugee being in the least affected.”\footnote{Ibid., 501.} Though many refugees are stateless people, not all stateless people are refugees, or vice versa. Displaced persons on the other hand usually indicate internal displacement, and a disqualification from refugee status due to not having crossed national borders.\footnote{Ibid., 502.} How these definitions play in to our understanding of the Palestinian diaspora and exile community is an interesting one. Ascription to these definitions place Palestinian refugees
who have gained citizenship in their host country out of the stateless category, but not necessarily the refugee one. Furthermore, displaced persons in the Palestinian context are often considered stateless, though not necessarily refugees. These placements are far from simple even if only addressing legal limitations; however, they are further complicated if expanded to also consider the role of imagination in the Palestinian community where refugees with citizenship to other countries maintain they are still stateless as long as they cannot gain citizenship to their homeland of Palestine – begging the question: what constitutes membership to the Palestinian diaspora community… the legal title of refugee or something more?

Malkki points out that while case studies on particular refugee situations have been plentiful, they have been lacking in theoretical framework, or at the very least uncritically borrowing from other domains instead of developing one of its own. The field subsumes a certain set of presumptions and generalizations about “refugeeness,” as well as the “quest for the refugee experience,” moving from defining refugees as a mixed category of people with the same legal status to people with their own identity and culture. These sorts of essentializations described do not allow for the inclusion of dialectic between the home country and compatriots that stayed behind that is required for the investigation at hand for the case of Palestine, but also elsewhere.

Malkki goes on to differentiate, citing Edward Said, between the connotations of exile and refugee, stating that the former “connotes a readily aestheticizable realm” and the latter “a bureaucratic and international humanitarian realm.” While I do not disagree, I maintain that in the Palestinian instance the two connotations and experiences of exile and refugee converge.

18 Ibid., 511.
19 Ibid., 513.
Though Malkki does encourage exploring new territory by studying the emplaced, a term she uses for those who remained, she does so only in the sense to ask the questions of “what is the state of not being a refugee?” and “how is it denoted?” so as to consider issues of citizenship and nationalisms. However, she does not go on to question the relationship between the refugee and the emplaced. Furthermore, her description as can be applied for studying the Palestinian case is even more problematized by the fact that the displaced persons she defined earlier as having not crossed national boundaries (1948 refugees in the West Bank and Gaza) are actually many of the same emplaced people still living within the Palestinian Occupied Territories, who are also not citizens of any state. Given these realities, building a theoretical framework within which to examine the greater Palestinian population requires a departure from the refugee studies perspective.

In navigating the literature, one finds a plethora of approaches. For example, Salman Akhtar in a psychoanalytic focus does not approach the issue of refugee, stateless, or displaced in his discussion of terms, but instead the demarcation between immigrant and exile. Akhtar delineates five markers: 1) the immigrant leaves voluntarily; the exile is forced out; 2) the immigrant typically has more time to prepare before leaving; the exile receives little notice before departure; 3) the events causing immigrants’ departure are usually less traumatic; exiles often flee catastrophic situations; 4) the immigrant can continue to visit the home country; the exile cannot engage in this “emotional refueling;” and finally 5) the immigrant is less likely to encounter hostility from the new host population. The interesting observation here, particularly

20 Ibid., 515.
in the Palestinian context, is that given Akhtar’s criteria, one could comfortably replace ‘exile’ with ‘refugee’ with no contradiction in historical or legal accuracy. Thus, here we shift to the arena of exile in the context of diaspora studies.

Up until the 1960s, the term diaspora was almost exclusively used to describe the Jewish experience. However, even in this tradition, there was a distinction made between diaspora and exile, largely based in historical specificity and choice of immigration. Diaspora is derived from the Greek “dia” and “speirein,” meaning to scatter, spread, or disperse. The verb became widely used around the fifth century BCE by Hellenistic writers in order to describe processes of dispersion and dissolution into various parts as it relates to atoms. Diaspora was used with a negative connotation and originally was not used to imply place or a particular sociological group. In the Septuagint, the Ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, diaspora is applied for varying nouns and verbs in order to convey Jewish existence away from the ‘promised land.’ The terms for exile on the other hand, Hebrew golā and galūt, conveying ‘banishment’ and ‘deportation’ were not translated into diaspora, but instead, Greek words meaning ‘captivity’ and ‘exile,’ specifically referring to the Babylonian captivity. Hellenistic Jews actually avoided equating golā and diaspora, insisting on the unique nature of deportation for exile in contrast to diaspora, which at times included chosen immigration. Particularly after the return to Palestine and Jerusalem in the 6th century BCE, there was no deportation in effect – constituting a case of diaspora, but not exile.24

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23 Ibid., 315.
24 Ibid., 316-317.
In 1966, George Shepperson introduced the concept of the African diaspora, referring to the dispersion of sub-Saharan Africans as a result of the slave trade. Whether intended or not, Shepperson set off a domino effect and the field of diaspora studies was both born and transformed. The use of the word across multiple disciplines began and the definition based in enforced expatriation and a longing to return to a homeland was adopted. Khachig Tölölyan, editor and one of the founders of the journal *Diaspora*, has described the adoption of ‘diaspora’ for multiple contexts as a desire to indicate the belief that the historically specific term “now shares meanings with a larger semantic domain that includes words like immigrant, expatriate, refugee, guestworker, exile community, overseas community, ethnic community.” The expanding use of the term to any dispersed group of people has made diaspora a sort of buzz word without refining its use. At the same time, it has also opened the door to explorations of what has been dubbed “diaspora consciousness” and the study of it and diasporic subjects as identities that are constantly undergoing transformation. In the search for a contextually appropriate or theorized definition, it is perhaps most important to remember Brian Smith’s assertion that “to define is not to finish, but to start. To define is not to confine, but to create something to refine – and eventually redefine. To define, finally, is not to destroy but to construct for the purpose of useful reflection.”

In this vein, I draw on James Clifford’s acknowledgment of the “entanglements” which complicate discussions of diaspora – the historical progression of the concept and practicing a

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25 Ibid., 322.
28 Ibid., 324.
discourse we should actually be analyzing. In the Palestinian case and for the purpose of theoretical engagement in this study, the goal is not to analyze the diaspora or exile community in and of itself and how one of those particular locales is formed according to rigid guidelines for naming parts of the community, but instead it is to look at it within an ongoing liberation struggle, and how the diaspora is seen to fit in to that struggle by those still in the homeland – an approach seemingly lacking in diaspora studies.

Tölölyan touches on the potential for this angle of study when he relays his Armenian experience and description of the Dashnak party as a transnational party with institutions in over a dozen countries, an exile government characterized in much the same way as the PLO of the 1970s and 1980s. He goes on to further describe his generation of young diasporan Armenians as understanding that they were more than the citizens of their particular states, but also “the diasporan wing of the Armenian nation.” However, in the following account he gives the greatest departure point for the focus of the emplaced populations’ perspective on the outside’s activity:

To wit: diasporas exist neither in necessary opposition to the homelands’ nationalism nor in servile relationship to them. Diasporas may criticize their homelands but not chastise them, especially when the diasporans live in EuroAmerica and the homeland is underdeveloped. Diasporas need not apologize for their alleged lack of authenticity, for the hybridity of diasporan identity, as if it represented mere decline from some purer homeland form. Rather – and there is an inevitable element of utopian self-congratulation here – at its best the diaspora is an example, for both the homeland’s and hostland’s nation-states, of the possibility of living, even thriving in regimes of multiplicity which are increasingly the global condition, and a proper version of which diasporas may help to construct, given half a chance. The stateless power of diasporas lies in

their heightened awareness of both the perils and rewards of multiple belonging, and in their sometimes exemplary grappling with the paradoxes of such belonging, which is increasingly the condition that non-diasporan nationals also face in the transnational era.\textsuperscript{32}

Here, he both sets ground rules for the relationship between the diaspora and posits a personal hope for the potential role of diasporas. Tölölyan maintains that the distinguishing diasporan feature is the existence of a committed activist minority,\textsuperscript{33} and though he proposes twelve separate reasons for adoption of the term ‘diaspora’ among dispersed communities, only two seem relevant to this study – one seems to apply to Palestine: “the affirmation of a collective subject;” and the other is ironically the very cause of the Palestinian diaspora: “the emergence of the Israeli state as a figure of diasporan achievement.”\textsuperscript{34} In fact, he specifically cites a 1989 \textit{New York Times} article in which two American Jews were offended at the application of the term diaspora to the Palestinian enemy as an example of the unexpected paths the application of the term has taken.\textsuperscript{35}

Julie Peteet reminds us that “naming is an assertion of power. In the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, naming can be a diagnostic of power; conflicts over naming reflect and are integral to contests over control and ownership.”\textsuperscript{36} In this sense, naming is not only relevant for places and events, but also for the words people choose to describe themselves and the members of their community. She goes on to point out that a Palestinian voice or narrative is rarely unaccompanied or not followed by an Israeli negation. This study will also be an attempt

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 7-8.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 18.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 23-24.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 9.
to not ascribe to this tendency. It is not a study of the conflict or Palestinian existence solely in relation to its Israeli other, but instead an exploration of how the Palestinian community – specifically members of its current younger generation – perceives its own realms of membership.

What is sort of bitterly ironic in the field of diaspora studies is that the Jewish archetype used to ground much of the theory has as its ‘achievement’ the instigation of the world’s longest running modern-day refugee problem. The field cannot relinquish its historical entanglements, as Clifford calls it, and even as some authors work to expand the definition and functionality of diaspora, they exemplify rigidity in understanding it by tying it solely to its ancient reference point. The historical reference points of the field insist on a difference between diaspora on the one hand and exile on the other, though authors consistently seem to refer to exile communities as a diaspora and vice versa. Ultimately, the contrast that shines through is an impression of diaspora as long-term to a degree that the circumstance is a part of the national identity and sociological landscape, while exile is an instance submerged in political struggle. The dilemma with the application of this distinction for Palestinians is that the line not only blurs, but the colors of each side bleed together to a degree where the original shade is unrecognizable.

The semantic differentiation between exile, *manfa*, and diaspora, *shatat*, are not irrelevant; but, if one is to understand this sociological component of Palestine as based in a refugee population that were not immigrants, but a sort of banished, exiled collective, then the diaspora is also only a result of that exiled reality. The politics conducted, even when discussed as activism in the *shatat*, is exile politics because the reason it is conducted away from the

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homeland is a result of a dispersion and reality imposed on the community. In other words, activism in the diaspora is itself an embodiment and expression of exile. The terms might not be synonymous, but for the Palestinian experience, they are very much inextricable.
Chapter 1: The Oslo Generation

Ahmed: You all going to Nabi Saleh every week…I don’t like it. It’s a bad idea.
Sami and Nabil: [confused looks]
Sami: What are you talking about? We made a promise.
Ahmed: I’m not saying I don’t agree with protesting in Nabi Saleh. I just don’t think all of you need to go on the same day. One lousy day of sweeping arrests and the entire Hirak38 is in jail, and then what?
Nabil: It’s possible, but it’s rare that the entire group is there together. Besides, this isn’t the point. The point is they need us and it’s an opportunity to learn. We need a training ground. And we voted, we’re committed.
Ahmed: Well if you voted…[rolls eyes]
Sami: Come on, we’re avoiding centralizing the leadership on purpose and don’t act like you don’t agree.
Ahmed: [grudgingly nods in agreement]
Nabil: We need to grow horizontally, not vertically, even if the process makes me want to pull my hair out sometimes. It’s better than us repeating their [PLO’s] mistakes.
Sami: Wait, it’s not all about them.
Ahmed: No, no. On this, I agree with Nabil. It is definitely about them. Having horizontal decision-making for the sake of it is not a strategy, having it because you’re trying to avoid becoming something corrupt and disconnected from resistance is.
Sami: It’s not like everyone at this table doesn’t understand or agree what they’ve become, but the past isn’t the same…
Ahmed: The hell it isn’t! You think we ended up with this sulta39 here because they were democratic and dedicated to resistance or because they signed a piece of paper to hold on to their own power?

Before I knew it, our after work coffee and argeelah turned into heated vying presentations on the history of the PLO and at what particular point it all went wrong. I sat in this posh Ramallah café with three young, male college graduates who minutes into a casual conversation on plans for Friday afternoon became suddenly determined to explicate the complete trajectory of Palestinian leadership’s past mistakes, and more importantly how they couldn’t allow themselves to repeat them. As the conversation veered away from history and

38 Hirak here refers to the name of their group, Hirak al-Shebabi al-Mostaqel, an independent youth movement involved in much of the organizing and protests mentioned throughout the study.
39 Sulta is the Arabic word for ‘authority’ and is the most common way to which people reference the Palestinian Authority.
back to current strategy of the nascent youth movement, Nabil looked at their phones sitting on
the table and silently reminded them this wasn’t a conversation to be having near phones\textsuperscript{40} or in
public, and the debate was shelved for another day.

I witnessed a variation of this conversation at least once a week, if not every day, for the
following three months I spent in the West Bank. Time and time again, it became evident that
there was a central axis on which the activists’ and youth’s conversation turned, and it was one
with which they had an uneasy relationship – the creation and presence of the Palestinian
Authority and how to mobilize the public despite them.

**Exile Leadership to Local Authority**

Today, the recognition of the PLO as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian
people is widely accepted by states in the international community.\textsuperscript{41} For decades, this
recognition was a central goal of the Palestinian national movement’s leaders living in exile, as
well as local party members of the PLO; however, it was also a sought after goal for Palestinians,
at large, whether they were living in the borders of Mandate Palestine or as refugees in the
diaspora. To recognize the PLO was to recognize Palestinians as a political community, and thus,
an entity with which Israel must deal directly and to whom it must grant, even if only in rhetoric,
certain rights and formalities. Ironically, however, the accomplishment of this recognition in its
most formal means, the Declaration of Principles, or the Oslo Accords as they are more

\textsuperscript{40} Many activists and youth are wary of discussing sensitive information near phones, even when they are not
speaking directly on a phone call, for fear that Israeli or Palestinian Authority intelligence is monitoring their
conversations.

\textsuperscript{41} The PLO was granted observer status at the United Nations on November 22, 1974; UN General Assembly
Resolution 3237 (XXIX).
commonly known, was the moment which transformed the PLO and its image within the Palestinian community.

Beshara Doumani points to this goal of recognition as “the central dynamic or iron law of the conflict over Palestine since it began in the late nineteenth century.”\textsuperscript{42} The refusal by the Zionist movement and its supporters to recognize the existence of Palestinians as a political community allowed continued land appropriation and forcible transfer of the population to continue without much challenge from the international community to the discourse of the actions or their execution by the Israelis.\textsuperscript{43} As Doumani catalogs the historical trajectory of this refusal, he proposes that this nonrecognition of Palestinians is a result of an “out of phase tension” – between the territory, Palestine, and the people, Palestinians – in which Palestine and Palestinians are consistently behind in their approach to historical moments of “erasure and birth of either identity or territory (but not of both simultaneously).”\textsuperscript{44} For example, his first two of four ironies which he presents is that the establishment of a state called Palestine was a defeat of the political aspirations of Palestinians, who did not favor the option of a separate political entity in southern Syria. Furthermore, the creation of a Palestinian state by the British was based upon the very denial of the existence of Palestinians as a political community and the development of a Jewish one.\textsuperscript{45} He points finally to the current situation of a push for a two-state solution as

\textsuperscript{42} Beshara Doumani, “Palestine Versus the Palestinians? The Iron Laws and Ironies of a People Denied,” \textit{Journal of Palestine Studies} 36.4 (2007), 49. He introduces and defines this concept of ‘iron laws’ as “the formative historical forces produced by the overwhelming asymmetry of power relations that have imprisoned Palestinians,” or what Rashid Khalidi called the iron cage. The ‘ironies’ he refers to are “paradoxes of history that subvert nationalist narratives about the past” and in conjunction with the iron laws, these elements point to a need for a reconfiguration for the way one understands the relationship between Palestine and Palestinians.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 50.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 51.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 51.
another such instance in which the formation of a Palestinian state “has become the vehicle for preempting, rather than delivering, self-determination for the Palestinian people.”

The “disappearance” of Palestine, the territory, in 1948 made belonging to a political community all that more difficult for Palestinians and provided the mechanism for Israel and its supporters in the international community to successfully de-politicize the Palestinian struggle for self-determination into a humanitarian refugee problem. Doumani explains that with every step closer Palestinians came to finding and using their own voice as a community, the more they were seen as a destabilizing force. The founding of the PLO in 1964 was an instance of the Arab League and Egypt’s President Nasir hoping to preempt the rise of a Palestinian national movement that could speak for itself. However, shortly after the 1967 war, it was reclaimed by the Palestinian Resistance Movement, and by 1974 and Arafat’s speech at the UN, the PLO had carved out their role as representatives of the Palestinian people.

In June 1974, the twelfth Palestinian National Council set the establishment of an independent Palestinian national authority as a main goal included in their famous ten-point program; at the center of this goal was preventing the eventual future of the West Bank to be linked to Jordanian control. Slogans chanted by Palestinians in the West Bank during demonstrations included “‘No to the occupation,’ ‘No to the restoration of Jordanian rule,’ and ‘Yes to the PLO.’”

46 Ibid., 52.
47 Ibid., 53.
48 Ibid., 54.
same year in Rabat, the Arab summit adopted the resolution in which the Jordanian regime finally conceded its role to a Palestinian institution to speak on behalf of the Palestinians.\textsuperscript{50}

The PLO, however, was selectively interested in local Palestinian matters and political mobilization. Those living as Israeli citizens, in what many Palestinians today refer to as simply “‘48,” were wholly neglected, and Fatah, Arafat’s party which dominated the organization, was more interested in having “agents, not partners” in the occupied territories. Despite its extremely popular support in Palestine, the PLO did not begin to invest in and support political institutions and actions in the Occupied Territories until years after the 1982 Israeli occupation of Lebanon. In fact, the PLO actively tried to divert the creation of formidable autonomous national institutions in the West Bank and Gaza.\textsuperscript{51}

The First Intifada in 1987 shifted attention from the actions and statements of the PLO in Tunisia to the popular committees and communities in the OPT. In the West Bank, Gaza, as well as areas occupied in 1948, there was a mass mobilization of all ages of the general public to participate in protests and strikes. Israel responded violently with Rabin’s now infamous “break the bones” policy; within the first three years of the Intifada, seven hundred Palestinians were killed by Israeli forces with twenty percent of them being children.\textsuperscript{52} The First Intifada was mobilized not by top-down directives or party agendas, but instead by what became known as the United National Command (UNC). While the UNC included key local members of secular Palestinian factions such as Fatah, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), the Intifada was led and run by

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 100.
\textsuperscript{51} Doumani, “Palestine Versus the Palestinians,” 54.
organizers who emphasized a bottom-up, grassroots approach to decision-making on collective action, and often times these local organizers “merely transmitted needs and decisions taken by popular committees.” However, as time passed, Israel’s imprisonment and deportation of many of the leaders left a vacuum that factions began to fill with hyperbolized rhetoric on armed resistance; the unity present in the early years began to disintegrate by the beginning of the Gulf War. During the Gulf War, many Palestinians put actions on hold to see what would happen, but by the time resistance returned after the War, meddling from the PLO in Tunisia rose significantly, and ultimately the local leadership splintered which led to dissolution of the Intifada altogether. For whatever outcomes resulted from the First Intifada, Mazin B. Qumsiyeh, professor at Bethlehem and Bir Zeit Universities, cites the development of local leadership “that shifted weight of activism from areas outside of Palestine to inside” as a main solid, positive gain.

While crucial, the splintering of local leadership towards the end of the Intifada was amplified by the severe financial crisis of the PLO. The PLO had lost significant support, moral and financial, from Arab nations – specifically, wealthy Gulf state support – after Yasser Arafat, supported Saddam Hussein in the first Gulf War. In March 1991, The Washington Times reported that PLO revenue had fallen from $300 million to about $40 million annually due to Saudi and other Gulf state aid cuts. That same month, in an interview with the Los Angeles Times, Arafat stated that the PLO would close 20 of its 92 diplomatic missions, shut down its official PLO

54 Ibid., 159.
55 Ibid., 160.
56 Ibid., 161.
publications, lay off employees, and severely cut travel expenses, but that they would not cut key social programs in the Occupied Territories. Chairman Arafat insisted “you don’t know how I am suffering to carry on paying for these social affairs,” as he sat behind his desk covered in stacks of bills, conveying an obvious sense of frustration.\(^{58}\)

This financial isolation was further intensified by growing political isolation due to an American presence in the region and wide-scale condemnation of Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait. The day after Saudi Arabia officially announced it had cut off funding to the PLO, April 12, 1991, Secretary of State James Baker was actively engaged in “sounding out Arab nations about backing a new Palestinian leadership” while trying to arrange a regional conference that would lead towards a comprehensive peace agreement with Israel.\(^{59}\) The PLO needed something to give the people: positive, tangible economic results, aid that would come with the signing of the Accords. They needed to affirm their position as the representatives of the Palestinian people amidst efforts to isolate and replace them. The Israeli government needed something as well: an end to the intifada with its escalating expenses and international unpopularity of the army’s violent response to Palestinian protest.

These needs led to the willingness of both parties to negotiate. By June of 1993, talks between PLO officials and Israelis were occurring at an unprecedented frequency after the lifting of the Knesset’s ban on the PLO in January of that same year, signaling a shift in Israeli policy. That said, many Israelis still saw endorsing negotiations with Arafat and the PLO as a means to “drive a wedge between those who live in the territories – and those who seek to lead from


outside,” grounded in the hope that the more direct contact that occurred between Palestinians in the Territories and the PLO in Tunis, the more the PLO’s authority would be challenged.\textsuperscript{60} These Israelis were not far off in their predictions and as a result of the Accords, the Intifada, as it was, ended, and the capture of “militants” was undertaken by the PLO itself. In his book, \textit{Secret Channels: The Inside Story of Arab-Israeli Peace Negotiations}, Mohamed Heikal, former editor of \textit{Al-Ahram} newspaper and confidante of Egyptian President Gamal Abd al-Nasser, explained that Arafat was “approaching a choice between unacceptable alternatives….He could uphold the cause of the Palestinian independence and remain an outcast at the head of a near-penniless movement, or he could accept the unacceptable and become the media prince of peace.”\textsuperscript{61} However, for all of Arafat’s largely understandable financial concerns, the rival groups to the PLO, and a personal desire to be deemed the sole representative of the Palestinians on an international stage, the choice he and the PLO made to enter into the Oslo Accords and proceeding processes did not ease financial difficulties. Dependence shifted from Arab state donations to the whims of Israeli occupation and US and EU aid, allowing Hamas rivals to gain momentum from every Oslo Accords failure. The initially desired undisputed recognition by the West for the PLO as the sole legitimate representatives was now meaningless, with their Chairman spending his last years besieged and in political isolation.

Oslo I, officially titled the Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements between Israel and the PLO, was signed on September 13, 1993 and accomplished precisely what is conveyed in the title – a declaration, not implementation, of principles. A few

\textsuperscript{60} Carol Rosenberg, “PLO Gaining Legitimacy in Israel, Some say Arafat’s group is preferable to its fundamentalist rival,” The Miami Herald, 1993, 16A.

days prior, September 9, Chairman Arafat and Prime Minister Rabin exchanged letters in which the PLO took historic steps, recognizing the “right of the state of Israel to exist in peace and security,” committing themselves to resolving final status issues through peaceful means and negotiations, renouncing the use of terrorism (implicitly accepting the accusation of them as a terrorist organization in the past), and accepting United Nations Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338.\textsuperscript{62} In response to a six point letter, Arafat, in return received a letter of six lines from Prime Minister Rabin agreeing to “recognize the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people and commence negotiations within the Middle East peace process.”\textsuperscript{63} The image alone when comparing the two letters illustrates the inequity expressed from the outset of the Oslo Accords and subsequent peace process and the position of power from which Israel was negotiating in comparison to that of the Palestinians.\textsuperscript{64}

The same moment in which the PLO is finally recognized by Israel, the US, and others as an organization that represents the Palestinian people, is also, as Doumani points out, a “moment pregnant with irony.”\textsuperscript{65} He shows how from this moment on, the PLO is transformed into a hollow institution synonymously identified by most Palestinians with the new Palestinian Authority, and the Oslo Accords, the instigator for on the ground realities that made the justification for signing it – an eventual independent state on pre-1967 borders – unviable.

Following the exchange of the letters of recognition, both parties signed Article VIII of the Declaration of Principles. The PLO was additionally charged with the responsibility of public


\textsuperscript{63} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{65} Doumani, “Palestine Versus the Palestinians,” 54.
order and internal security for the Palestinians, while Israel remained responsible for the same in
regards to Israeli citizens, many of whom are still present in settlements throughout the West
Bank. Article VIII puts the PLO, and later PA, not in a position of protecting Palestinians, but in
reality creating a police force that will protect Israelis from Palestinians.66 Qumsiyeh describes
the Oslo Accords as having “snuffed out resistance in the West Bank and Gaza,” totally isolated
Palestinian citizens of Israel, fragmented Palestinians into categories of inside (and where inside)
and outside, not to mention political camps of pro- and anti-Oslo.67 As participants would
continue to remind me, these divisions and new introductions of identities were decided and
imposed by Israelis, not Palestinians.68

The remaining permanent status issues, “including: Jerusalem, refugees, settlements,
security arrangements, border, relations and cooperation with their neighbors, and other issues of
common interest” are mentioned in Article V and would be left for negotiations in the coming
transitional period, beginning no later than the third year of said interim period.69 The
negotiations and decisions regarding these issues are not only postponed for a later date, they are
also treated by Oslo I as if they are as much a minor component in the conflict as they are in the
Declaration. The secret negotiations in Oslo were further complicated, as Saree Makdisi points
out, by the fact that Arafat, Abbas, and their assistants “had no intimate knowledge of
cartography, water aquifers, international law, or the Geneva Conventions,” whereas Israelis
possessed all of this knowledge in addition to a personal awareness of on the ground realities

67 Qumsiyeh, Popular Resistance,164.
68 Makdisi, Palestine Inside Out, 102
from their administration of the occupation for the past twenty five years; Arafat and Abbas had not been to the West Bank in almost thirty years.\(^{70}\)

The Interim Agreement on the West Bank and Gaza Strip, more commonly referred to as Oslo II or Taba, was signed in September 1995 and is significantly longer and much more convoluted than Oslo I. This agreement divided Gaza and the West Bank into three areas, A, B, and C, with specific borders and rules for their administration and security. Most summaries of Oslo II do not accurately convey the meticulous and calculated undertaking of the plans outlined in the Accord. It is not only exclusive detailing of the three areas, their borders, and mapping, but also the security controls ranging from specification of numbers of policemen, village by village, to procedures for checkpoints and the issue of safe passage between the West Bank and Gaza. Issues of education, healthcare, agriculture, forests, fisheries, election protocol and mechanisms for international observers, are all addressed, but even to the untrained eye, two realities are very evident amidst the legal language and odd attention to the number of pistols allotted to each police station. The security of Israel as the top priority and the development of the Palestinian Authority as a massive body, with only derivative power from Israel, executing the day to day, ins and outs of the occupation is one reality that is glaringly evident.\(^{71}\)

The Oslo Accords and the alleged peace process had begun to appear more and more for what it was to Palestinians living in the West Bank, Gaza, and elsewhere – a series of disputes and agreements that were manifestations of the administration of the occupation by Israel and

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complicity by the PA, time and again neglecting permanent status issues and sincere resolutions. The continued selective implementation of agreements in the period from the signing of Wye River in 1998 until Camp David in 2000 and following proposals from Jordan, Egypt, and the Sharm el-Sheikh fact finding mission in 2001 further obstructed the “path to peace” on which the Palestinians and Israelis were meant to be travelling. It is undeniable that whenever the time came to negotiate permanent status issues, contention would be high and agreement would be difficult, particularly with changing Israeli leadership, but the process of the Oslo Accords to delay their discussion altogether as settlements expanded and economic disparities widened in the West Bank and Gaza resulted in an entrenchment in a strategy based in negotiating negotiations instead of negotiating the points of contention themselves.

According to the security agreements between the Palestinian Authority and Israel in exchange for the political recognitions they each received, Israel maintained the right to withhold tax revenues from the PA, enact closures in the territories, control border flows of labor, capital and goods, and continue the unequal distribution of water and land.\textsuperscript{72} Nothing had changed for the people on the ground and as corruption and mismanagement grew, the money pledged from international donors had less and less of an impact and the environment of the occupation continued to discourage investment.\textsuperscript{73} In 2000, when the Israeli economy slid into recession, the Palestinian economy plunged, and unlike Israelis, who remained comfortable, the Palestinians’ situation deteriorated. Israel’s GNP ended the decade in 2000 ten times higher than that of the

\textsuperscript{72} Karen Pfeiffer, ”The material basis of Palestinian Society: a long-term perspective,” \textit{Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies} 12.2 (2003): 120.

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid.
West Bank and Gaza. The Second Intifada in 200 was not surprising for many; another economic downturn fueled the already severely aggravated experience of Palestinians in the territories. Worse, Israel only intensified these issues with its road closures, cancellation of work permits, and economic embargoes on Palestinian businesses. Palestinian labor and land has played a large role in propping up the Israeli economy since the beginning of the occupation. Karen Pfeifer argues that “any new political arrangements must do what the Oslo agreements failed to do, namely take account of the interactive aspects, as well as the separate features, of their economic situations.” Pfeifer’s analysis here speaks also to the security and political focus of the Oslo Accords, as well as the marginalization of the human experience affected by its agreements.

The World Bank has predicted that it will take twenty years for the Palestinian economy to return to its condition before the Second Intifada. The current scenario is so severe that when examining growth, one finds that between 2000 and 2004 the Palestinian economy lost all growth it had achieved in the preceding fifteen years. The numbers are staggering; real GDP declined by twenty four percent and over twenty two percent in 2001 and 2002, contracting the Palestinian economy almost by half. More importantly, it is the policies regarding the closures and seizures of land that underlie the economic woes of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. Then there is the matter of the “security wall” Israel continues to build, of which only eleven percent actually runs along the West Bank’s border with Israel, and in some areas enters nearly four miles into the West Bank, dividing communities, roads, and water networks. This area in

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74 Ibid., 123.
75 Ibid., 124.
77 Ibid.
between the Green Line and the wall includes about ninety five thousand Palestinians. The Israeli government has effectively adopted a habit of using postponement of permanent status issues and economic deprivation as a means to force a desperate leadership into accepting “a highly compromised outcome.”

Meanwhile, the generation born during the First Intifada or shortly after has both seen this reality unravel and grown up with stories of martyrs and heroism of the resistance for which the PLO is still greatly remembered. Their adolescence was made up largely of the experience of the Second Intifada, the breakdown of the peace process, an internal political division between Fatah and Hamas that has left the Gaza strip besieged for the past six years, and most recently they have been the foremost witnesses of the uprisings in surrounding Arab countries. Whether they are entering, enrolled in, or graduating from college or looking for jobs, this generation, like Palestinians of all ages, is looking towards its future with the understanding that the political is inextricably linked with the social and economic. How they are defining their role in that ‘political’ is an undergoing process affected by factors including, but not limited to, the PA, political socialization, current societal attitudes and tendencies towards youth activism, and their conception of what comprises ‘Palestinian society’ in their national movement – all of which are informed by the historical moment in which they live.

**The PA and the Israeli Occupation**

The general awareness among Palestinian youth of the PA is as a corrupt body and an impediment to mass mobilization, but said awareness is tempered by the realization of insufficient public support to push for the PA’s complete dissolution. AWRAD, an independent

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78 Ibid., 91.
79 Ibid., 95.
research center,\textsuperscript{80} cites in a February 2011 policy paper on a “youth-based political vision” that while participants view the PA as “corrupt,” “structurally problematic,” and even an “economic investment project that benefits a small group of opportunists, instead of the national cause,” they also realize that it “feeds millions of Palestinians;” consider its establishment an important achievement; and believe that dissolving it would mean a return to full occupation, to which they argue people are not prepared to return.\textsuperscript{81} Instead, the youth set their priorities on ending the political division between Fatah and Hamas in 2006, reforming the PLO, and developing a new political strategy – though they make no specific mention of what that should be. Despite being overwhelmingly frustrated with the culture of party politics that surrounds them, they are not so naïve enough to believe that said culture can be eradicated from Palestinian society. Their proposals for dealing with the impact of factions include conducting workshops and strategy sessions between independent youth and party-based youth groups to find common ground and using media to raise awareness and increase participation.\textsuperscript{82} The role of media in mobilization and organizing will be discussed in more detail in Chapters 2 and 3; however, the impact that these opinions of the PA are having on larger understandings of the current situation among youth are perhaps farther reaching than the AWRAD survey implies.

\textsuperscript{80} Arab World for Research and Development describes itself as an independent research organization which works in “social, political, and economic research and development through sound and rigorous policy and applied research.” This policy paper is part of its SAWT program which “supports democratic and developmental discourse among Palestinians through the conduct of public opinion polling and policy research” and as the “voice of the Palestinian public, especially youth, in policy-making areas.” AWRAD has a wide range of partners and clients ranging from the World Bank, IMF, USAID, to the Palestinian Authority and local NGOs. Its lack of differentiation on its site between funders and partners versus clients who have hired them to conduct polls makes it difficult to further analyze their intention or potential political leanings. There is a general lack of methodology explanation in the polls and papers as to how the samples were chosen. This policy paper, for example, has no extensive discussion of how the acquired their information from the youth sample. Youth who I mentioned their research to seemed generally unaware of such opinion polls having even taken place, let alone the reputation of the organization itself.\textsuperscript{81} AWRAD, “Palestine in the Eyes of its Youth: A Youth-Based Political Vision for the Future,” February 2011, 9.\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 10-13.
Repeatedly, conversations in interviews, focus groups, and social gatherings would return to the moment of Oslo and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority. The youth were not simply critical; they were practically dumbfounded at how the priority of leaving the PA in power came to be placed over collective action and unity. The salaries, the infrastructure projects, the fear of return of full occupation were not their main conclusions for what was holding society back from calling for its dissolution (though those reasons were admitted). Ultimately, the hesitation came down to two factors – apathy and exhaustion. More importantly, the party responsible for this apathy and exhaustion was the Palestinian leadership.

Yousef shook his head out of nowhere about halfway through an unrelated sentence, stopped speaking, and sighed. I waited, wanting to see what was on his mind. Aboud, his neighbor, sat still too. And then Yousef looked at me and spread out his arms, signaling to the Dheisheh Camp around him. “Ok, I’m under occupation. My nation has been fragmented. I can’t communicate between other cities and villages,’ but I dream of a state while I’m sleeping…. Everything that’s happening today, they’re just screwing with us, they think we’re crazy.” “Crazy, how?” I asked him. “The PA normalizes everything. They’ve got us dealing with everything casually. Even the checkpoint today, if I want to go to Hebron and there’s no checkpoint, it’ll feel unnatural. There has to be a checkpoint; it’s necessary. If there’s no checkpoint, it’s a problem,” he said with sarcasm and frustration. Yousef, who had been poised and collected for the first 30 minutes of our talk, was suddenly visibly at a loss. “I don’t believe in organizations or organized work [in an official sense]….Fatah and those who organized they made us lost. They had us sign Oslo and go to the streets happy that we had an “Authority,” a

83 The Dheisheh Camp is a refugee camp near Bethlehem.
state; but after 10, 20 years, we learned what the Oslo project was – Nothing! They [those who negotiated] delivered the Israelis; they don’t pay for the cost of the occupation like they used to during the First Intifada. Today the cheapest occupation in history is here.”

For Yousef and so many others, their perspective on the PA or the impact of its establishment went far beyond a simple recognition of corruption. There was a deep sense of hurt that this Palestinian institution has become tied to the occupation. But the analysis went deeper than this cooperation with the occupation or even inaction, it also hit on the PA’s active role to suppress mobilization, and it illustrated an awareness of and refusal by the youth of the effect it is having on their communities. This refusal, however, is not discussed merely in terms of objection to the current situation, but is coupled with a call to action invoking the desire for political resuscitation and rejuvenation of mass mobilization in the community.

Fadwa: There’s also a case of anesthetization and defeat that was planted in us by our leadership. ‘Take a loan and buy a car; take a loan and buy a house.’ Everything is about wanting to travel, to make money to take loans that will help make that happen. I mean, at the minimum, a person is in debt to a bank for 15 years. There are no national values now. Before, when there was a martyr, everyone went out for the funeral, whether they knew him or not.

- Other participants: Right; True; Just yesterday there was one and no one did anything -

Fadwa: We have become anesthetized! We are in a state of self-anesthetization, convinced that we can’t do anything. If you want to have a protest near Beit El, you can’t. The PA comes and stops you or at Qalandia they give arrest orders that people shouldn’t be allowed to go and when people went – [shakes head and shifts mid sentence] – I mean there is a politics working against us to sit and shut up or for them to help us to emigrate, you understand? So, the youth that are aware of these things being planned

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84 Beit El is an Israeli settlement near Ramallah and is also where the Israel Civil Administration for the Occupation is located. Many Palestinians go here to apply for various permits, particularly in regards to movement and travel.

85 Qalandia is a main checkpoint for Palestinians forbidding them from access to Jerusalem.
for them, it’s their role just like it’s all of our roles now since the recent movements that have occurred, the Arab revolutions that gave hope to the youth, that “No we can.”

Tarek: We’re awake.

-Nablus focus group

The Politics of Political Youth

Periods of defeat in a people’s history are witness to a rapid growth in critical spirit that can often develop into resentment and anger. Yet this critical spirit, even in the form of resentment and anger, remains an indispensable constructive capacity…Thus a people’s periods of defeat take on a rigorous and stern examining character, an internal sort of self-punishment, its basic aim being to increase its capability of self-defense. This critical spirit in times of defeat seems all at once to awaken human feelings in times of danger, feelings that double the capacity for both self-awareness and confrontation…Periods of defeat, however, witness not only the awakening spirit of criticism and re-examination, but another very closely related phenomenon as well, namely that of the spirit of criticism gone beyond its own limits into a kind of withdrawal through an exaggerated form of self-punishment.86

Patriarchy is reflected in the very foundations of our social and political life as well, where it serves to inhibit the emergence of young people into the ranks of the leadership. In a period of rapid social movement, however, what is required is that generation’s ascent, not its shackling.87

On March 11, 1968, Ghassan Kanafani spoke these words while giving a lecture in Beirut at a conference addressing the then recent 1967 Arab defeat. The lecture he gave, later reprinted after his death in two parts in Al-Hadaf in 1988, focuses largely on the themes of channeling critical analysis toward creating a new working strategy and of integrating the youth into political mobilization. Both of these themes maintain a sort of eerie timeliness today. The lecture, titled “Thoughts on Change and the ‘Blind Language,’” is a response to what Kanafani sees as both an intellectual and political failure for innovation and the mistake of neglecting

87 Ibid., 141.
youthful contributions to the political dialectic. Kanafani presents the concept of the “blood circulation system,” in which the younger generation represents the blood that “renew[s] that society and bring[s] it to interact with the developmental movement of the age.” The lack of such circulation in combination with a discourse that has worn out its meaning, he argues, leads to a lack of a working strategy.

Almost forty five years later, Kanafani’s assessment still holds, and it can be seen not only in the reactions of Palestinian youth – who feel the Oslo agreements and the PA have left them unsure where to start in building a popular movement – but also in society around them. An overwhelming majority of participants of interviews and focus groups of this study, as well as local Palestinian and diaspora activist youth with whom I had extensive personal encounters, expressed that they were explicitly discouraged by elders – parents, family members, teachers, and of course the Palestinian Authority – from political action. They reflected that their parents were worried for their well-being; others said they simply wanted to ‘live their lives,’ that the day to day of the occupation was enough; others differentiated between their parents and their grandparents, who seemed to be more encouraging of direct political activity. Often there was a sense of humor on the issue as many were quick to point that this lack of support from older generations was also coupled with a sense of pride when they organized a successful action despite their family’s urgings. Many of the participants reflected that they were taken to their first protest as children by the very parents who are actively discouraging them from engaging in local and international organizing efforts today.

88 Ibid., 156.
89 Ibid., 149.
While participants cited fears for safety as the main concern of parents, the PA rhetoric they complained of was filled with a significantly higher rate of condescension. Almost none of the activists and other youth who participated in this study received degrees from foreign higher education institutions or had plans to travel outside of Palestine for school; though, their simple association with activists who have, they told me, has them constantly accused by PA security and intelligence forces of being ‘American’ and ‘Western’ as a means to delegitimize them and question the authenticity of their alleged grassroots approach. After an article was released insinuating similar critiques, Ahmed⁹⁰ furiously responded in conversation to me how hypocritical it is that Fatah allowed the American General Dayton to train their PA security forces but somehow his friends are ‘American.’ Of course, there are also the commonly propagated social critiques writing off youth activism as romantic and naïve idealism. Though such critique frustrated youth, they generally accepted it as a function of a generational gap with parents and a power struggle with the Palestinian Authority. However, sitting with activists, one of the deepest sources of frustration they conveyed was within the youth community itself.

The activists recognized an internalization of the discouragement from the society around them, something one described as “a culture planted in us that we should warn, to be skeptical of the ability to produce change.” This internalization, they insisted, is one of their greatest obstacles, if not their main one. In another public opinion poll of twelve hundred Palestinian youth, conducted by AWRAD as recently as January 2012, a majority of youth (eighty seven percent) “have confidence in the ability of their generation to lead the country in the future;” whereas, only thirty eight percent “feel that they personally can have an impact on public life,”

⁹⁰ From conversation at beginning of Chapter 1
showing a break between confidence in their generation as a whole and their own personal sense of empowerment.\textsuperscript{91}

These pervading social attitudes towards youth activism are not uncommon or specific to the Palestinian context. In \textit{We Fight to Win: Inequality and the Politics of Youth Activism}, Hava Rachel Gordon examines adult gaze, academic achievement, and the struggle for political legitimacy in two urban, teenage activist groups – one in Oakland, CA and the other in Portland, OR.\textsuperscript{92} She advocates for a need to “confront age as a socially constructed category of difference and inequality rather than a simple reflection of biology.”\textsuperscript{93} Gordon points that typical biological and cognitive explanations for the particularity of the youth experience often leads to researchers and society operating under the assumption that “young people are somehow isolated from the processes of history, social structure, and culture.”\textsuperscript{94} She admits that there has been a shift in the literature in recent years that has begun to look at youth as “social actors and producers of culture in their own right;”\textsuperscript{95} however, there is a gap in the literature regarding youth and political action.

Most discussions of political agency of youth have been limited to subcultural studies focusing on music or leisure, but they rarely address instances of organizing overt political resistance.\textsuperscript{96} Similar to many of the feelings conveyed by youth in Palestine, the youth in Gordon’s study point to contradicting messages from the adults in their life. Gordon presents the

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{AWRAD} AWRAD, “Results of a Specialized Opinion Poll among Palestinian Youth,” February 2012, 4.
\bibitem{Gordon1} Though Gordon studies two high school aged youth groups, many of her greater observations are applicable and relevant for college-age youth.
\bibitem{Gordon2} Hava Rachel Gordon, \textit{We Fight to Win: Inequality and the Politics of Youth Activism} (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 5.
\bibitem{Gordon3} Ibid., 6.
\bibitem{Gordon4} Ibid.
\bibitem{Gordon5} Ibid., 11-12.
\end{thebibliography}
model of youth as “citizens-in-the-making” and the common public reference that “the children are our future” as models and understandings which lead to assumptions of actualized citizenship as something exclusive to the realm of adulthood and one in which the youth is cognitively and socially deficient – it is a “segregation between adult and youth worlds, one that has real implications for leaving young people with very little political power.” 97 The issue is rarely about whether or not to ever get involved, but more one of when and how. The when is often ‘when you’re older’ and the how is a formal, institutionalized path, but not grassroots citizen activism. School clubs based in political parties, Model UN, student governments, etc. are elevated and sought after as appropriate means of youthful exploration of politics, but organizing direct action is discouraged and politics as a whole is narrowly defined. 98 Gordon argues, like Kanafani, and as the participants regularly conveyed, that there are subtle and overt attempts by adults, and even other youth, to prevent young people from building a political, collective voice. However, as Kanafani suggests and Gordon identifies, this “exclusion from political participation is not a biological inevitability: it is the result of institutional and interactional social processes, which young people themselves resist using various strategies.” 99

This discussion of political socialization and responses by youth regarding how they feel received in their community is not meant to make a general statement on all youth, or even all Palestinian youth, but these responses are reflections of tendencies and attitudes that help to set the context in which these youth live and organize themselves. Their motivation for and local capacity and obstacles to organizing locally directly affect how they are discussing the role of

97 Ibid., 9.
98 Ibid., 60-94.
99 Ibid., 10.
and integrating their diaspora counterparts into their attempt to rejuvenate and lead a popular movement. The political resuscitation for which youth like Fadwa and Tarek advocate is part and parcel of the community rehabilitation discussed by participants in the following chapter, especially in regard to the themes of ties to and communication with youth in the diaspora.
Chapter 2: Perspectives on Placing the Palestinian Exile

After a couple of weeks of trying to find a time when Awda wasn’t either at work or in a women’s union meeting, she insisted I just come over to the house late one night after she had returned from class at Bir Zeit University. I knew her sister’s wedding was coming up soon, so I offered to wait until after some of the planning madness died down at home, but she scoffed at the suggestion and told me to come have some tea and meet the family. After a round of introductions, everyone left us alone in the living room and we started to chat. Awda was strikingly the most at ease of any of my individual interviewees, and she spoke with a compelling sense of confidence. As we weaved our way through the questions, she seemed like she was waiting for me to get to something, some point, some determinant axis on which all this talk about diaspora and Palestinians in America turned. And then it came.

“Some people have mentioned to me the observation that tarabot\textsuperscript{100} with the diaspora has lessened since Oslo,” I said. Awda smirked, put down her tea, and tapped her cigarette on the ash tray. Before I could continue, she interjected. “Look, it didn’t lessen. It was killed,” she said. “Oslo came and removed hope from the entire Palestinian people…there became a cultural distortion that we’re in a state….Oslo allowed us to believe the lie that we have an autonomous Palestinian government….And this cut the soul of the Palestinian struggle.” She would reiterate it twice before the end of our conversation. “There is no tarabot between Palestinian causes inside and outside,” she told me. “We are not tied together.” She explained that of course there are memorials and events by Palestinians in many countries, but that “unless you participate

\textsuperscript{100} Tarabot is the Arabic for connection, bond, or ties.
personally or via your party or your club or organization or whatever, you don’t know anything about it.”

**Tarabot and Tawasol**

The belief that ties and a general connection with Palestinians living in the diaspora was relatively non-existent was a recurring theme. Nadeem from Beit Sahour took Awda’s response one step further: “There isn’t tarabot. If there is, it’s because of small families. When you talk about West Bank Palestinians and Jerusalem Palestinians, they consider each other ‘the other.’ I mean the West Banker considers even the Jerusalemite as living in privilege in the sense that he can move around, go where he pleases, can travel…” Nadeem shook his head, “and you’re asking about tarabot with the shatat? Jerusalem is fifteen minutes away.”

Again and again, I received head-shakes to the idea of a presently bonded Palestinian body including the diaspora. Not all were as explicit as Awda and Nadeem’s comments, but where there was not an explicit statement on the state of tarabot, there were clear expressions of uncertainty regarding Palestinians outside of Palestine and the youth’s relationship to them as a whole. Almost everyone made a point that the bond that was lacking was not a personal or emotional one, and even Nadeem despite his analysis on ‘the other’ did not question people’s sense of personal sense of belonging to one another or to Palestine. What was lacking was a political or national bond to those outside and the participants decisively pointed to two factors – tawasol\(^\text{101}\) and representation.

Participants overwhelmingly agreed that while ties between the “inside and outside” are not strong, tawasol is starting to increase in significant ways among the youth. Many participants

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\(^\text{101}\) Tawasol is the Arabic for communication.
pointed to the internet and Facebook as a mechanism of exposure for events in the diaspora, as well as local initiatives in Palestine, but more importantly they see its potential as a means to network as activists and fellow Palestinians. Maryam, a student at An-Najah University from the Nablus focus group, pointed to this growth in communication, not only as a reality, but as a crucial goal to widen the perspective and give depth to the cause. For Maryam and others, the absorption of this diversity of perspectives within the struggle was something understood to be vital for the health of the Palestinian community both inside and outside historic Palestine.

Fadwa, also in the Nablus focus group, added that “there’s a goal [from outside forces] for us not to communicate with each other as Palestinians….A path was not developed and nurtured for me to feel that me and the Palestinian outside have the same troubles; there is something in practice of dividing the Palestinians amongst themselves!” More than this though, all participants of the Nablus focus group made a point to place responsibility on the youth for maintaining this increase in tawasol and its effect on better tying Palestinian communities together. Fadwa went on:

…the youth that are aware of these dangers, they have to say ‘No! We want to build lines of communication with Palestinians outside’ and as long as there is internet and these methods, that’s enough of allowing silly limitations to govern communication between Palestinians; it’s enough….The youth that are aware of these issues have to start working on creating something new to communicate, even if it takes time. It will take time, but I think this is a responsibility…for us to start working on creating communication with Palestinians everywhere. Our time to say our piece has come.

While the sentiment of communication as integral was widespread among the participants, there were also a few who saw potential pitfalls in the popularly hailed internet and social media mechanism. “We Palestinians became used to all of our work and struggle being
underground, meaning how much can we stay unknown and working quietly is how much we can hit the occupation in all its locations. So this progress in *tawasol* was also negative from the perspective that the occupation has benefitted from some of the openness. But I think the positive aspect – how much a person can express – is stronger.”

It was common that this hesitation or cautious nature was outweighed by an acknowledgment of the benefit outweighing these concerns.

Dina said her first encounter with and realizations of political actions in diaspora communities, particularly Palestinian-Americans was not through the internet or books, but through word of mouth and meeting a cousin who was active in an American university; from there, she began to notice activity on Facebook. Other participants wanted to use the rise in communication to focus on Palestinians “with passports,” who could get to Palestine and therefore, get to know some of the activists in person and so those in Palestine could gain a better sense of what was possible in other countries.

Even with this positive outlook on the rise of and need for communication, none of the participants saw the internet or any other technological mechanisms as sufficient for addressing the deficiency in *tarabot.* Almost all of the participants, minus the focus group of 18 yr old girls in Beit Sahour, self-initiated a conversation on reviving the Palestinian National Council (PNC) through direct elections. The Beit Sahour focus group, younger than their peers, focused more on the cultural than the political, looking to sports, music, and the joint projects through

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102 Awda, R3.
103 The Palestinian National Council is the legislative arm of the PLO and constitutionally required to have representatives for Palestinians living in the diaspora. Candidates for the PNC are nominated from within the PLO Executive Committee; most Palestinians have considered it defunct since the establishment of the Palestinian Authority, and particularly since the Second Intifada.
internet communication. Even when pressed to consider a political side, they did not volunteer any sort of larger official or organizational solution.

Me: You’re speaking about the cultural side; what about from a political side?  
- From the cultural side, the political side comes out. Any activity Palestinians take part in, they will end up talking about politics.  
- If it’s a direct political thing, people will get scared, and might not want to participate.  
- Yeah, some sort of exchange program, for example.  
- I mean it doesn’t work to tell someone who has never been active that ‘you need to do this and work and whatever.’

Of the remaining twenty participants, sixteen saw the PNC as the most effective means to re-integrating the exile community into political decision-making, as well as strengthening social ties. For many, conversations about the role of Palestinians in exile continued to return to the issue of representation and a sort of loss without it. “My vision is that there has to be a united body for all of the Palestinians, without divisions, whether it’s the West Bank and Gaza, ‘48, refugees, the shatat, America, or wherever – the creation of a council that rounds up all of the Palestinians in the world and that its decisions, in unity, express the will of all Palestinians,” Hassan reiterated for the second or third time. “The cause can’t be just in universities,” he continued “and divided when we don’t have one, united demand – because without a united agenda, the work of Palestinians here or in Brazil or America or anywhere isn’t going to do anything.”

AWRAD’s February 2011 survey on the youth’s political vision also observed similar trends of participants focusing on the need for a reformed PLO and a call for new PNC elections. The policy paper goes as far to state that “to the research facilitators, the interest of the youth in the PLO was ‘somewhat obsessive and to a large extent nostalgic.’ According to the research
facilitators ‘the participants were so keen on bringing back the good old days.’”\(^{104}\) There is no denying a sense of nostalgia present among the youth when discussing the PLO, however, the tone and comments from the participants I spoke to were less based in a harkening of past glory days as much as a frustration with the current context. The participants did not seem necessarily to be keen on ‘bringing back’ any particular time period remembered fondly, but were insistent on re-instating a mechanism (which most argued was never truly utilized in the first place) that could lead to comprehensive representations for Palestinians both inside and outside the Occupied Territories.

In contrast, four of the twenty participants who mentioned the option of reviving the PNC and also identified the government’s current inability to represent refugees and Palestinians in exile were hesitant to pursue PNC elections with the same enthusiasm as their peers. When asked their source of uncertainty, they consistently cited their lack of confidence in the Palestinian Authority as overpowering any belief in the potential of the PNC to improve representation or affect reforming the PLO. Dina, who is tied in a social capacity to numerous activists who participated and were involved in a public call for PNC elections, told me “I think in regards to politics for refugees, I don’t consider our government something to be depended on or something that has the ability to cause change. The people, generally, are always considering the refugees and land.” She went on to point out that the solution will not be found in some official plan, “It’s all about the people these days, especially now with all of the Arab revolutions, the government doesn’t have a big role anymore.” For Dina and many others whom I encountered throughout the

\(^{104}\) AWRAD, “Palestine in the Eyes of its Youth,” 9.
summer, the question was less about whether or not the PNC would ‘fix’ anything as much as it was about changing the conversation altogether.

The political resuscitation and rebuilding of ties within the community for which they called sometimes comes in official forms, as with the calls for the PNC, but they maintained an insistence that it was not the official means which they were after. While some did not spend as much time as their peers focusing on the urgency of an organized council, they continued to recognize the movement and pressure to create such an entity as a positive and important one. As with so many calls and demands, the youth seem to acknowledge the nuance and idealism present, but at this stage are emphasizing process over product.

Spring and fall 2011 saw a surge of initiatives by Palestinian youth both inside Palestine and in the diaspora in a growing attempt to build momentum for collective resistance for liberation. Some of these initiatives will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3, but one that is important to note here is the growing public campaign and conversations on the PNC undeniably informing the participants’ responses. According to the site for civic registration of Palestinian voters, the campaign for direct PNC elections was most recently re-launched on January 27th, 2011 by a call through the General Union for Palestinian Students (GUPS) from Palestinians students in the UK. In February and March of 2011, the DC, New York, and Austin, TX chapters of the United States Palestinian Community Network (USPCN) echoed that call, coupled with a demand to reform the PLO and dismantle the PA. The March 15th End the

Division organizers highlighted the need for democratic PNC elections in their demands, and like the GUPS students were a source of reference for diaspora calls such as those from USPCN chapters. On April 9, 2011, youth in Ramallah organized an event featuring “a wide range of speakers…on the revitalization of the Palestinian National Council, including Dr Karma Nabulsi, Jamil Hilal, Dr Anis al-Kassem, Suheil Natour, Mamdouh al-Akr and youth activists, lawyers, writers, and thinkers, along with poetry, cultural, dabke, and children’s activities.”

Testimony from attendees conveyed an awareness of the visible presence of the mukhabarat, including an altercation when agents attempted to instigate an argument afterwards.

Later that same month, the Facilitation Office (FO) was organized by civic associations and Palestinians from the shatat, as well as occupied Palestine. The purpose of the FO as stated on the website is to provide “technical assistance and support to all Palestinians who wish to assert their right to democratic participation in and representation by the PLO in the PNC….The mechanism of the civic registration drive, including the mechanism for secure voter registration, was developed as a public service to all unregistered Palestinian voters, most of all the Palestinian refugees in the shatat and for Palestinian youth, who are driving the Campaign for Direct PNC Elections.” The Campaign for Voter Registration focuses on “organizing for the rights of disenfranchised Palestinians, foremost our refugees and youth.” Whether or not there will be elections during the spring/summer of 2012 remains to be seen, though it seems

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[108] “Mukhabarat is term used to refer to intelligence security services.
extremely unlikely. Elections aside, the registration drive is pushing forward and the Campaign announced in November 2011 that the internet site register for secure online voter registration would be available for use by May 2012.

One aspect of the preparation for the registration drive has been a public awareness campaign including collective video projects and connecting youth in various countries to discuss how to move forward. On January 10th, 2012, Palestinian youth held meetings in the UAE, Palestine, Lebanon, Spain, Italy, Sweden, the UK, the USA, Cuba, and Chile which were connected via live media. For those who were not able to attend the conference call, a Facebook event page and Twitter hashtag was developed so they could send in their suggestions. The youth published a summary of their conversation a few days later; a main recurring theme was the responsibility of the youth taking a lead role in ensuring every Palestinian’s “equal right to participate in direct elections.” Less than a month later in Lebanon, individuals and civil society groups from the Palestinian community organized a Palestinian Representation Week with events in Beirut on February 3rd and in Saida on February 4th discussing “the crisis of Palestinian political representation as part of an emerging popular campaign demanding the reform of Palestinian representation structures, starting with the organizing of Palestinian National Council elections.” Throughout all of these developments, civil society organizations and other participating activists have credited and exalted the youth with guiding the debate.

These formal steps forward and institution-centric efforts for bringing in the diaspora community have not stood alone. In every single interview and focus group, the Nakba day

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111 “I want to vote for the PNC,” [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TtPibkKBzsI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TtPibkKBzsI).
protests of May 15, 2011 – when hundreds of thousands of Palestinians protested, including refugees on the Lebanese and Syrian borders – were a point of conversation and identified as a moment of hope. Awda reflected, “That was really the day that we felt nothing is impossible. We can, wherever we are, express our refusal at that time, express our right of return, our right in the homeland, our right in decision-making of what’s going to happen.” Almost unanimously, the Nakba protest was a moment they recognized as the whole community finding strength in its parts and vice versa. For others, it was a moment that brought back in to focus the big picture. Fadwa and Maryam from the Nablus focus group discussed it as a challenge to accepted norms of organizing.

Fadwa: They made us believe that the ceiling has to be low and “Yee, the refugees! What return? Where are we going to put them?” and in the end some Hijazi made it all the way to Yaffa.¹¹⁴ ...Why is our ceiling so low? Why?

Maryam: Ok, listen we know it’s a long way away and that it’s a large vision and it might not come to fruition for another 100 years, but we also know that if we keep talking about it for another 1000 years, it’s also not going to work. We have to start working. It’s not just a political issue, it’s also about social and cultural liberation – and that is based in our ability to work as one Palestinian body.

Again and again, the idea that public shows of resistance in exile give hope to the nascent youth movements in Palestine was emphasized. A generation that has lived its entire life with the local as the focus is once again starting to look outside its geographic borders for support. They are unwavering in their insistence that the diaspora has a role to play in Palestine’s future and that Palestinians living under occupation should re-infuse resistance with the voice of the refugees.

¹¹⁴ During the May 15, 2011 Nakba day protests more than 100 Palestinians breached Israel’s border and crossed over into the Occupied Golan Heights. One man made it to the coastal city of Yaffa; his story and interview went viral. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CdoOK_ust0w](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CdoOK_ust0w)
and its greater community; however, what that role should entail seems to be a more difficult question for them to answer.

‘Palestinian Society’ and the Shatat

Before moving on to how the youth view the role of the diaspora in resistance, I want to relay a few basic findings regarding conceptions of who is included in the term ‘Palestinian society’ and whether the diaspora falls in or out of that society, or somewhere else altogether in the imaginations of these participants. Though many participants stated that they were not explicitly taught how the diaspora relates to Palestinian society regarding any specific role, they did say there was a concerted effort in their upbringing to make them aware of the existence of an exile Palestinian community that is outside Palestine as a direct cause of forcible expulsion. There was some diversity in responses regarding whether or not the diaspora community is a part of ‘Palestinian society,’ with a considerable amount of participants insisting unequivocally that the shatat is indeed a part of Palestinian society and that any attempt to consider them simply a part of the societies in which they live would be giving in to the desires of the Israeli Occupation. These participants recognized that in effect, “unfortunately,” Palestinian society is considered the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem – “the divisions imposed by the occupation.” However, they contended that any real study of Palestinian society had to include the diaspora and ’48 Palestinians.

Others limited their definition to those living in ’48, historic, Palestine, but did not leave diaspora Palestinians as members of the societies in which they reside, but instead as between two societies, a “hybrid.” Regardless of where the participants fell in this spectrum, there was a general awareness of the diversity and complexity of the Palestinian circumstance and social and
cultural gaps not only between Palestinians living outside and inside, but between Palestinians living inside Palestine. This realization left many of the youth hesitant to make grand conclusions on inclusion within or exclusion from a ‘society.’ This hesitation was further augmented and confused by a refutation to give in to categories imposed by the identity cards and travel restrictions put in place by the Israeli Occupation and the security agreements of the Oslo Accords.

In response to what one participant termed “a natural, but unfortunate” reality of the marginalization of those outside, another member of the group “reminded” him that the Palestinians outside of the West Bank and Gaza are the majority, not the minority of Palestinians. The young man was left with no response to his peer.

Role of the Shatat & The Palestinian-American Community

Me: [asking Tarek]… so then, what in your opinion is the best thing for Palestinians there to do to help Palestinians here? For example you said –

Maryam: [interrupts] Why “help”? The word “help”[115] isn’t right. Their work should be on the same scale as ours and with the same importance, that’s all.

Awda: I believe in a saying: “nothing scratches your skin except for your nail.” I really believe it. I am completely convinced that there are people in solidarity internationally, but I always consider that someone in solidarity will speak about me as a Palestinian, but he can’t speak or express like I do.


…

Yousef: …there are a lot of Palestinians living in America, living happily and they come and go and do what they want with freedom and they come to Palestine here and see the situation and they want to teach us how to resist the occupation. Ok, man, you want to resist? Come resist with us, don’t live relaxed in America and come to me once a year…

Aboud: [interrupts] and he instructs you

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[115] The Arabic word used for “help” here was yousa’id. I did not typically use this term when asking the question, but was repeating the statement of Tarek, another participant. Upon doing so, Maryam took issue with its usage – a far cry from Ibrahim’s response below.
Yousef: …and tell me how to resist. I’ll give you an example. About 6 years ago, a Palestinian girl from America came – do you know what her idea was? She wanted to do volunteer work in Beit Sahour. She wanted to teach Palestinian kids how to throw stones at Israeli soldiers. Screw you.

Aboud: Throwing stones at soldiers is instinct for Palestinian kids; before he can write his name, he knows how to do that.

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Hassan: I mean there was a phase for me too where I felt like other people that there was only what was here that was resistance. This feeling of “you’re writing and my friends are dying every day and I spend 6 hours on a checkpoint,” but then I did come to believe that writing was a form of resistance, awareness campaigns have a role, that there are multiple kinds of suffering, that they were forced out and became refugees and there are reasons behind their travel.

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Ibrahim: It’s not my responsibility to run after them [the diaspora]. He should be running after me and helping us here. (Gaza focus group)

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The continuity I found in conversations on *tarabot* and *tawasol* with the diaspora began to dissipate when we shifted to the role of that diaspora. Moreover, when the questions elevated from the role of diaspora, in general, to the Palestinian-American community, specifically, the continuity vanished altogether. What was more striking than a wide range of opinions and perspectives among different interviews or focus groups was the back and forth many times of the same individual or group.

I was suppressing the urge to smile about halfway through Aboud’s next response. I could tell I wasn’t hiding it very well when he paused, “What? What is it?” “Nothing, I’m sorry. Please, go on.” “Come on, what is it?” he insisted. So I backtracked, followed my notes and memory, and relayed the progression of his responses. I knew I was going off track and this could end very poorly, but it was too late now. “First, you said there is nothing Palestinians in America can do to benefit the cause unless they come to Palestine to resist,” I began. “Yes, that’s right,” he said. “Ok, then you said that something positive could be raising awareness,” I went
on. “True,” he agreed again. “And just now you detailed the many ways to resist available to Palestinians around the world, through music, by pen – that struggle and resistance doesn’t have to be marching to a checkpoint, and that these methods could be used not just by Palestinians but by internationals, as well.” Yousef started to smile. Aboud looked at him and laughed and then looked back at me, “You just made this difficult.” “I’m sorry,” I said a little nervously and half smiling. But there was no reason for my nervousness; Aboud found the whole thing more than a little entertaining and with another laugh he said to me – “What makes you think we’ve got it figured out? We talked through ideas in this interview the same way we talk through ideas amongst ourselves. If we had all made up our minds and agreed on these things, would you have a reason to interview us?” The answer was most obviously “No.”

As I continued conducting interviews and spending time with activists, what became quickly apparent was that participants and acquaintances were more interested in what other people were telling me than trying to push a certain opinion. On almost every topic of conversation, the youth I spoke to had relatively strong and significantly informed positions, but on the issue of how they understood their own relationship with the diaspora in the larger struggle for liberation there was a sort of self-admission that they were still asking the same questions to each other that I was asking them.

For some, their hesitation to offer suggestions on how the diaspora could or should contribute to the Palestinian cause was based in a simple recognition that they didn’t know what was possible. In many cases the initial response was that participants felt they couldn’t answer the questions because he or she didn’t know enough about the circumstances of Palestinians in America or other countries to do so. Though after such an admission was made, they would often
move on to a general agreement that Palestinians outside of Palestine have limited potential to impact building a movement. A few specifically cited their role as the de-facto leaders of the international public relations battle with Israeli Apartheid; others insisted that their priority should be pressuring the government of the country in which they live to end its support of Israel – this was especially the case when discussing Palestinians in America; and for others still, the youth focused on the issue of preserving Palestinian identity as a form of resistance in and of itself.

Jamal, from the Nablus focus group, and Mohammad, from the Gaza focus group, had a unique approach that intrigued their peers. They proposed that given the obstacles of occupation and travel for Palestinians coming to the West Bank and Gaza, perhaps the role and arena of activism that would be easier to develop for now is between youth in various diaspora countries themselves, as opposed to starting directly with those in Palestine. Others completely denied the presence of complications with travel and insisted that Palestinians with passports from other countries could come and go as they pleased, but simply chose to stay away.

All of these suggestions were then amplified by seemingly contradictory perceptions of Palestinians in the diaspora. On the one hand, a majority of participants differentiated between Palestinians in Arab countries and those in the West, referring only to the former as refugees. Further, many of the West Bank participants, particularly in the Ramallah and Bethlehem groups, seemed to be under the impression that most, if not all, Palestinians in the United States are from the West Bank and could return if they chose, but stay in the U.S. for economic reasons. Palestinians in America are seen to be more vulnerable to cultural influence of their host country, and most importantly, there is an overt suspicion that they view themselves as superior to
Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. Reem reflected that after coming to live in the United States for school, “I realized the kind of picture a lot of Palestinian-Americans have of Palestinians at home is one of sympathy and in a sense superiority. There is a lot of idealization of the local.” The girls in the Beit Sahour focus group stated that the media around Palestinian-Americans makes them think “that we don’t know anything” and that “we’re ignorant, that we’re all still living in tents with camels and sheep around us.” Dina described Palestinian-Americans as the “cool” people who come to spend summers in Ramallah.

On the other hand, the differentiation seems to be flipped on its head entirely when the issue of pride or activism arises. The same girls who think Palestinian-Americans see themselves as superior to those living in Palestine later hail Palestinian-Americans as having more awareness about the cause, as well as an admirable pride in identifying as Palestinian, than Palestinians living in Jordan or other Arab countries. An overwhelming majority of participants single out Jordan, with one participant going as far as to call Palestinians there “as good as fans and admirers, nothing more.” When participants were consequently questioned on the issue of the right of Palestinians in America to speak on the cause, they seemed altogether confused I would even question their ability to do so, even given the concerns of privilege and distance of the community just mentioned. To suggest that only the people’s opinions and actions inside Palestine were the ones who mattered was an unacceptable participation in the politics and discourse of Israel’s segmentation of the community. Ultimately, while most participants recognized the perceptions of their surrounding community on the prioritization of the local, there was also a principled and determined attempt to push those perceptions back to find an in between. “The way we want to talk and think about Palestinians in America, it shouldn’t be the
same conversations we’re having about international solidarity. Maybe we have reservations and I don’t want the exile leading, but that doesn’t mean I want them to lose their particularity or their voice. My liberation is tied to his and his to mine; coordination between us is important.”

Awareness of Activism

From questions and conversations on the role of the diaspora in political activism and opinions on the Palestinian-American community, we moved to what specifics the participants actually knew about Palestinian activism in the United States. Responses ranged from knowing nothing at all, admitting that they are aware activity is present but that they are simply unaware of its details, to others who listed multiple groups and specific initiatives. One third of the participants had very vague ideas about Palestinian activism in the United States. Most of these youth believe that the activism that is present leans towards organizing small protests or releasing certain statements, but they could not supply any examples of groups or projects. It is important to note that these individuals also believe that these small protests or statements are the most the Palestinian-American community can contribute.

Another third list humanitarian and financial aid assistance to refugees and students as the main contribution of Palestinian-Americans, but do not believe that there is any significant movement within the Palestinian-American community either to be politically involved in Palestinian resistance or to influence the American public. This third has the general impression that non-Palestinian Americans are more active on behalf of Palestine, or at the very least that the boycott initiatives and other political activism present are not led by Palestinian-Americans.

116 Mohammad, Gaza focus group
The final third were very plugged in to the activist community in the United States, aware of and knowledgeable about groups, such as Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP), Adalah, and USPCN, as well as specific activities like University of California, Berkeley’s divestment campaign, instances of flashmobs made public on YouTube, and mock checkpoints and Apartheid walls at numerous university campuses. While these participants did see that Palestinians were involved in the solidarity groups, unlike some of their peers, they did express a desire to see the movement to be more Palestinian-led. They also commented that their awareness of Palestinian activism is not widespread or representative of the greater population in their cities. Many pointed to Israel’s attack on Gaza in 2008/9, the March 15th End the Division, and again, as seen earlier, Nakba day protests in 2011, as moments where coordination and communication with Palestinians in America was heightened and activists inside and outside encouraged each other’s endeavors.

**Conclusion**

Conceptions on what constitutes ‘Palestinian society’ vary greatly, but do not seem to have a correlative impact on understandings of diaspora communities as integral components to the Palestinian cause. Overall, there is a sense among the youth that while the bond between Palestinians in the Occupied Territories and in the diaspora is weak, communication among the youth of both communities is on the rise and this is a moment of progress on which activists should continue to build. What is most evident in the range of opinions and perspectives regarding the role of the diaspora, opinions on the Palestinian-American community, and awareness of Palestinian-led activism in the U.S. is that youth are thirsty for the perspectives of the peers around them and curious about what is being done by Palestinians outside Palestine –
evidenced by the questions they asked me when given the opportunity after interviews. Despite nominal hesitations or negative impressions of Palestinians in America or other countries, there is an overwhelming recognition that members of the diaspora, as Palestinians, sit outside of the solidarity framework and have different rights and responsibilities than other international activists. So then one must ask - what conversations and collaboration is that translating into for activists?
Chapter 3: Between Solidarity and Leadership

For most, though certainly not all, politically active Palestinian youth in the United States, campus solidarity groups are the main mechanism through which they organize. Working as a Palestinian in a solidarity framework is an experience fraught with uneasy questions about voices, agency, and empowerment. Often times, these activists are also members of Palestinian groups such as USPCN, the Palestinian Youth Movement (PYM), Adalah-NY, or Al-Awda in their local communities, but on their university campuses, it is mainly through groups like Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) where they find and choose to operate in productive spaces to raise awareness, advocate, and mobilize action for Palestine. Reasons for this choice vary and include but are not limited to some Palestinian students finding the reach of a solidarity group more effective in coalition building and awareness campaigns, a focus of a non-Palestinian audience, or simply an absence on campus of other options.

When discussing the kind of activism employed by Palestinian youth in the United States, Selwa, a New York based activist raised in the San Francisco Bay Area, reflected on this latter reason:

“when there was first GUPS, the General Union of Palestine Students, this was when it was actually effective in communities such as in San Francisco where there’s a large Palestinian population, for Palestinian students to be able to come together and not have to do solidarity work but to actually discuss together about being Palestinian and working within the community. But now, a lot of it has shifted to solidarity work where we – on most college campuses, it’s Students for Justice in Palestine – it’s not specifically for Palestinians students. So, that’s why, I think, a lot of it has shifted to awareness. It’s a mix of people now; now it’s more about awareness and not solution making.”

Selwa’s point here is an important one and touches on the issue of available space for Palestinian youth in leadership roles. For decades, GUPS and other Arab organizations on campuses in the
United States and around the world supplied a space for Palestinians in exile to organize definitively outside of the solidarity framework and as up and coming leaders of a national movement. GUPS was launched in Cairo in 1959, prior to the establishment of the PLO, and grew to over one hundred chapters and one hundred thousand members globally. By the mid 1990s, however, the network collapsed. There have been attempts to rebuild GUPS chapters, most notably and successfully at San Francisco State University (SFSU). One student, Raja Abdulhaq, wrote on the need for such efforts, insisting that “it’s important to understand and consider the urgency of having an umbrella organization for Palestinian students in the US.... GUPS was once a major force within the Palestinian national movement, and it can be again.”\(^1\) Despite these efforts and calls to rebuild, such re-establishment of chapters has been minimal and a large majority of Palestinian students in the United States continue to navigate the solidarity landscape of university campuses and organizations such as SJP.

When the National SJP conference was announced, I was still in Ramallah, tying up loose ends, packing, and getting ready for the trek across the Jordanian border. Activists from multiple SJP chapters in the US had been emailing each other regarding a national conference for almost a year, and casually mentioning the need for one for significantly longer. Students around the country recognized they were facing the same challenges, many of them working in groups with the same name, and decided it was time to build a structure for a national body in which they could learn from each other’s experiences and take a moment to reflect on their own role as activists in the U.S. The conference was titled ‘Students Confronting Apartheid,’ and scheduled to be held at Columbia University on October 14-16, 2011.

Some of the main Palestinian organizers I knew had mentioned reservations in the past including, but not limited to, the potential of a national student solidarity group distracting from grassroots and local approaches to organizing, as well as the vulnerability of solidarity organizations to be appropriated and exploited by groups with other agendas or student activists who express an uncomfortable level of autonomy in their solidarity work. While those concerns had not disappeared – and were largely integrated into the discourse at the conference, they seemed to be decisively overridden by a desire to empower and connect solidarity activists. So, from early August until mid-October, it was full steam ahead, and it seemed everywhere you turned as a student activist for Palestine, something or someone you knew reminded you of the upcoming event.

After months of being told by Palestinian youth and activists in Palestine that there needed to be more communication with Palestinian organizers and efforts in the U.S., I decided to get in touch with a friend on the National SJP Coordinating Committee about including a workshop on potential and means of coordinating organizing with activists in Palestine. In true activist fashion my offer to help connect any organizers who would be interested in conducting such a workshop with youth in Palestine quickly turned into me being asked to co-facilitate the workshop on solidarity and accountability. So the emails, brainstorming sessions, and Google Hangout meetings began, and for weeks I was engaged in a conversation with four other activists, two of whom were Palestinians (as well as an Egyptian-American and Lebanese-American student), on the limitations of a solidarity movement and the need to hold itself accountable to the Palestinian perspective.
In many ways, the discussions and debates we teased out while planning the workshop demanded different language than it would have had it been one strictly for Palestinians. However, after our three Palestinian activists – one video conferencing in from Gaza, and a Palestinian citizen of Israel and Palestinian refugee raised in Syria who were present – spoke on the questions of solidarity to our attendees, it was obvious from the type and tone of questions that many of the Palestinian-Americans spoke on the issue of their own accountability in much the same way as non-Palestinian students. When a Palestinian student mentioned that her campus’ chapter requires the President to be a Palestinian, many of her peers were taken aback and unsupportive of the idea, including Palestinians present. She was visibly concerned that she had been misunderstood and judged, even by the facilitators and speakers.

The point of this story is not a value judgment of SJP, but an illustration of a microcosm. This young Palestinian’s moment of pride in her group’s charter, and her following hurt at the reaction to it, speak to larger questions of empowerment within the Palestinian-American community. In the same way that youth in Palestine expressed that their peers have internalized the discouragement to be active, Palestinian youth living in America find themselves fighting an internal nagging that they do not have a right to speak as leaders of a Palestinian movement. They know that they do not fit neatly into the solidarity framework, and for whatever real or perceived sense of superiority youth in Palestine suspect of Palestinian youth activists in America, the Palestinian-American youth are indeed aware to some degree of their privilege and distance – sometimes to a self-inhibiting degree. When the PLO entered the West Bank and
Gaza, it simultaneously left the *shatat*.\(^{118}\) The generation that was raised with the PA in its midst in Palestine is the same generation whose diasporic counterpart was raised totally removed from an experience of the presence of political leadership and a united, clear vision. Today, however, that absence of political leadership is something both wings of this generation have in common.

**Making Connections and Moving Forward**

Noura Erakat, Palestinian human rights attorney and advocate, has argued that of attempts by several organizations to fill this political void and lack of clear strategy, the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) National Committee (BNC) has come the closest “to representing comprehensive national interests.”\(^{119}\) She explains, however, that the BNC also does not see itself as fulfilling a political mandate, and that it insists the political leadership and strategy for self-determination should come out of the PLO. The BDS campaign against Israel is an example that while shaped by a rights-based approach moves beyond public relations politics by employing direct economic and political, in addition to moral, pressure until Israel complies with international law. For Palestinian youth in Palestine, as well as the United States, there is a feeling that BDS has given them something concrete to contribute, instead of being limited to symbolic action. It describes itself as “a strategy that allows people of conscience to play an effective role in the Palestinian struggle for justice” and holds true to the principles of ending the occupation, dismantling the Wall, equal rights for the Palestinian citizens of Israel, and the

\(^{118}\) This departure from the diaspora is not only a physical one (as they had already left Lebanon, for example), but also a symbolic exit from exile and simultaneous entrance to Palestine, even if only to limited territory. One could argue, as Jamil Hilal does, that the PLO’s move from Beirut to Tunis – leaving Palestinian communities with which it had direct interaction – in 1982 (a decade prior to the signing of the Oslo Accords) put the PLO on a path of bureaucratization which alienated the social base from the leadership.

refugee right of return. BDS has been endorsed by political parties, trade unions, organizations, and movements representing refugees, as well as Palestinians in ’48 historic Palestine and the Occupied Territories. It challenges the members of the state system who are unwilling to hold Israel accountable by instead calling on their citizens and civil society around the world to do so. It pushes the rights-based framework away from its main risk factor. The language of BDS does not cower in fear of being accused of being too “radical” or not explicitly setting itself within the two-state solution status quo. Still, it is also not clearly contextualized within a larger national strategy.

Despite this lack of national strategy, and perhaps because of it, BDS’ principles have become guidelines for Palestinians and non-Palestinians alike under which they can unite. The National SJP Conference was one example of this. Six months after the conference, over one hundred SJP chapters are just now finalizing the last round of voting on what their national structure will look like, but in a matter of minutes the same one hundred chapters and over three hundred and fifty students voted almost unanimously on the BDS principles as the points of unity to come out of the conference at that weekend’s final session. However, as Erakat notes, “the BNC’s support of a human rights agenda may suffice for solidarity movements, but it certainly does not for Palestinians who need a political vision and goals…[it] can act as a compass, it does not provide a destination.” Ultimately, it is this question of a destination that is shaping the kind of activism Palestinian youth are pursuing, and their focus on and prioritization of process over product.

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120 As stated on their website: http://www.bdsmovement.net/bdsintro.
Before leaving Ramallah, my friend Nabil approached me, “I need to talk to you about something, but it’s confidential for now.” “Of course,” I said. It was a vague idea in the works to re-enact the Freedom Rides of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, but this time Palestinians boarding Jewish only settler buses on Jewish only roads heading toward Jerusalem. “We need a U.S. public relations effort; is there a network we can mobilize effectively?” he asked me. He got his answer in early November. For the two weeks leading up to the November 15th event, Twitter, Facebook, local papers with opinion editorials, mainstream news outlets were flooded by messages and pressure from U.S. based activists to cover the event. The organizers in Palestine livestreamed the action online; meanwhile Palestinian youth and solidarity activists boarded public transportation in DC, New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago raising awareness of the action and the Israeli response and arrests. Palestinian activists in the West Bank were encouraged by the concentrated effort to publicize their protest, and Palestinian activists in the U.S. were visibly delighted and proud to have been in the loop of the planning process in Palestine.

A few months later, the hunger strikes of Khader Adnan and Hana Shalabi – Palestinian prisoners under administrative detention – re-ignited the Palestinian community in the United States, and once again communication between those in Palestine and those in the diaspora spiked. Youth were utilizing many of the networks built during the spring 2011 March 15th End the Division and May 15th Nakba day protests to exchange news, ideas, and organize collective solidarity hunger strikes and public actions that could be merged to make videos and photo

122 Administrative detention is a practice based on a British Mandate emergency law which allows for the arrest and indefinite imprisonment of an individual without charge or trial. According to Ad-Dameer, a Palestinian human rights organization, there are 309 administrative detainees in Israeli prisons as of February 1, 2012.
albums for international dissemination. Immersing oneself in this community, one thing is evident; youth are trying to answer their questions about where the diaspora fits in to a larger movement through practice more than theoretical debate. In the absence of a clear national strategy, youth are capitalizing on issues and moments: freedom of movement via the Freedom Rides, political prisoners and unlawful detention via the hunger strikers, and representation via the call for PNC elections and diaspora voter registration. Maryam describes what they want to avoid:

“the danger now is…[if the gap between those theorizing and on the street grows] we’re going to be liberating Palestine online, saying ‘Free Palestine’ and that’s it, just waiting for it to be liberated….this direction toward the street is not at the level it should be; this is the danger of hypothetical/default activism – that I posted something, I’ve done my part. I think this is a problem for many activists outside too. They feel like ‘we didn’t go out for a protest in front of the Israeli embassy, but we shared the event and we’re done.’”

These young activists recognize the progress and potential present, but they also understand that the gap they are working to close is not merely a geographic one. The political culture they are trying to revive is one based in transforming the debate to which they are so accustomed in engaging into direct action. How they accomplish that transformation is a strategy under development, and these coordinated initiatives tackling multiple issues are one of the ways they are re-infusing their communities with conversations of resistance and activism.

The youth’s focus on their particular locales is undoubtedly ever present, but there is also a desire to refocus the vastness of their cause. Participants in Gaza vented to my surprise, “the siege on us and the division overrides all of the news and all of the conversations of Palestinians. It’s too much. Why? We, here in Gaza, are not the whole cause. Gaza is a symptom of the colonial disease we are fighting.” Finding ways to coordinate with Palestinian youth in the
diaspora has become a central component in this search for moving forward. The division between Fatah and Hamas, an unsuccessful September statehood bid, a flailing PLO leadership, a return of unpopular negotiations with Israel, and a sharp increase in home demolitions and arrests of Palestinians by Israeli forces has left the activists in a state of decentralized bewilderment regarding where to start and who, if anyone, can or should lead. But every new project is a part of a new conversation and bit by bit activists on the ground are chipping away at a comprehensive approach.\textsuperscript{123} Youth are reaching out to each other and laying the groundwork, so that if and when the formation of a representative body is achieved, they will have the voices to give it direction, and one with diversity. Much of the organizing happening now is not just about chipping away at a comprehensive approach, but doing so in a trial and error manner, learning from their successes and failures.

There are two ways to understand the manifestation of the youth’s conversations on diaspora in these coordinated efforts of activism. One is to easily write off what is happening as an issue of a resurgence of the Palestinian street and an exclusively local political resuscitation, with the diaspora merely playing public relations backup to these events. The second, and I think the more accurate and effective way of understanding what is happening, is that these coordinated initiatives have been and continue to be a way for these youth to renegotiate their understandings of where the other fits through practice and process.

From the Palestinian-American youth perspective, they are getting their feet wet and trying to find where their voice belongs. From the perspective of Palestinians in the territories, they are building a foundation and a network that can have the potential to mobilize and work

\textsuperscript{123} This selection is from my article “Who says Palestinian resistance is dead?” originally published February 3, 2012 at \url{http://electronicintifada.net/content/who-says-palestinian-resistance-dead/10891}.
with the diaspora at a later stage. Both locales of this generation see what they are doing and this moment as an early one in a longer trajectory.

**Final Thoughts**

While I think that the collection of perspectives from Palestinian youth in Palestine is integral to gaining insight to their evolving conceptions of the shape and role of diaspora Palestinians, a future project would obviously be to look at the other side and explore how youth in the diaspora see themselves in this dynamic. Something to watch for now is if these coordinated initiatives will continue to come from the Occupied Territories or whether Palestinian youth in the diaspora will make proposals not tied to things we have heard inside Palestine. My conjecture is that such a development is unlikely in the near future, but would be an interesting twist to the conversation these activists are having.

In the introduction to this thesis, I wrote that one of the goals of this study and its approach would be an attempt to move past the tendency present in literature on Palestine of discussing a Palestinian narrative only in relation to its Israeli ‘other.’ In some ways, this paradigm on the ‘conflict’ is a difficult one to escape, engrossed and entrenched in what Doumani calls the “erasure/affirmation” and “colonization/resistance” binary,\(^\text{124}\) it pervades through the discourse and one’s conditioned starting point of questioning and analysis. However, in other ways, its alternative is ever present and glaringly obvious when gaze is re-directed inwards. It is a paradigm Palestinians break out of on an individual basis almost daily, and it is one that today’s youth, collectively, is actively working to navigate and rebuild. Something that became quickly apparent to me in my conversations with youth and activists both in Palestine

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\(^{124}\) Doumani, “Palestine Versus the Palestinians,” 60.
and in the United States is that the discussions they are having among themselves, nine times out of ten, do not fit into the literature’s obsession with the “identity/territory/sovereignty matrix.”

Palestinian youth are becoming increasingly aware of the need to reflect and re-evaluate their capabilities individually and as a collective in order to find new ways to coordinate activism between themselves and re-imagine what they have been told is out of reach. If academic and ethnographic contributions are meant to, in any capacity, enrich our understandings of the complexity and diversity of the human experience, then we, as researchers, can and should choose to be as courageous as these young Palestinians in the questions we ask about the world in which they, and we, live.

125 Ibid.
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